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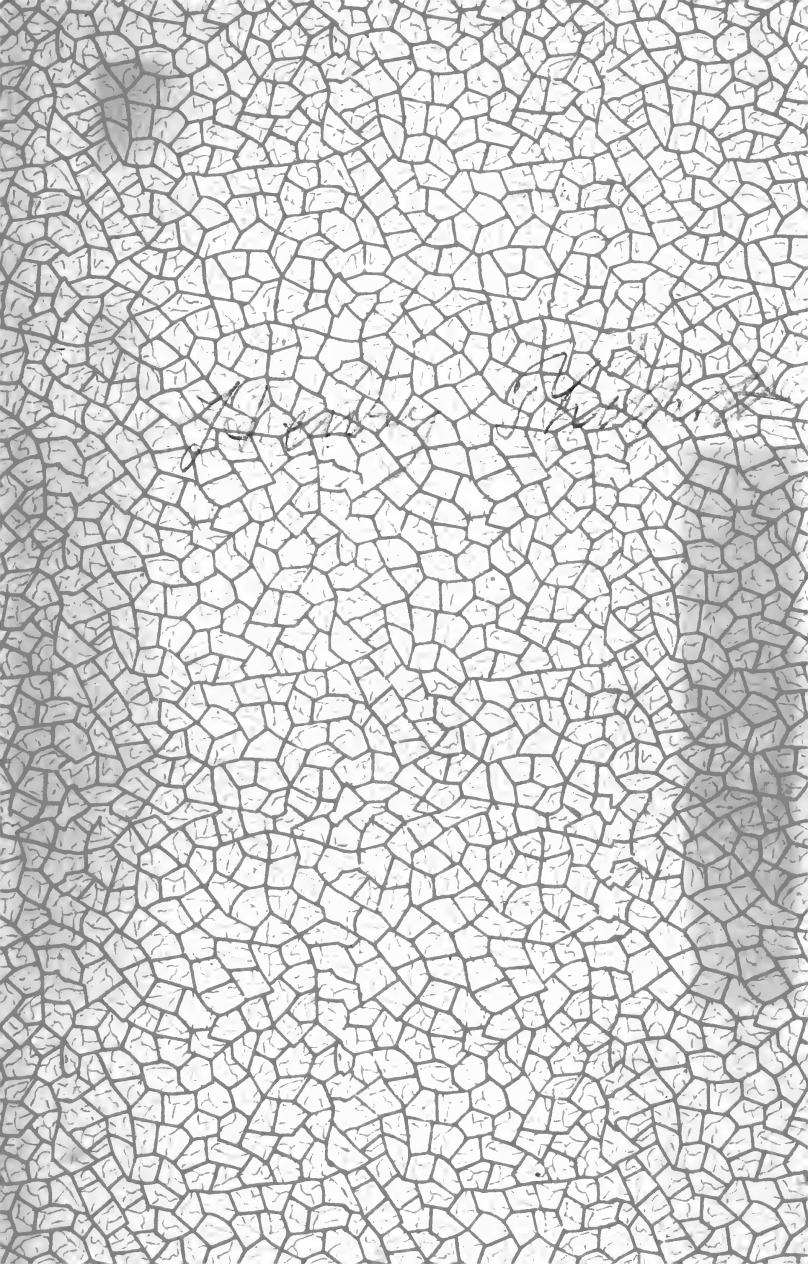
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A GREAT TEMPTATION.

VOL. I.

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A GREAT TEMPTATION.

BY

DORA RUSSELL,

AUTHOR OF

'FOOTPRINTS IN THE SNOW,' 'THE BROKEN SEAL,' 'THE TRACK
OF THE STORM,' 'A FATAL PAST,' 'THE VICAR'S
GOVERNESS,' 'THE LAST SIGNAL,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.


VOL. I.

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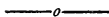
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A GREAT TEMPTATION.

A GREAT TEMPTATION.



CHAPTER I.

A LETTER FROM THE DEAD.

‘I WISH you would tell me the truth,’ said a girl, looking earnestly at the embarrassed face of a man standing before her.

‘The truth is often very painful, Miss Ingram,’ he answered, with down-cast eyes.

‘Still I should rather hear it. You

say my poor father has left very little behind him. What do you mean by little?’

Again there was a painful pause—painful to the lawyer, George Gifford, who was unwilling to wound his listener; painful to the girl whose future depended on his words.

But after a moment or two of silence she looked up impatiently.

‘Do speak!’ she said.

‘Well,’ replied Mr Gifford, slowly, ‘as far as I can ascertain, after the Major’s debts are paid, and you wish this done—’

Certainly.’

‘There will be very little left—some three hundred pounds, not more.’

‘Three hundred pounds!’ repeated the girl, also slowly, and a thought-

ful expression passed over her face.

‘I can live for a year on that.’

‘Yes, perhaps a year.’

‘And in a year I shall have done something! Your news is not worse than I expected, Mr Gifford, after the reckless way my poor father lived during the last years of his life. I knew he was very much in debt, and often begged him to be more economical — but it was no use.’ And the girl gave a restless sigh.

‘It was very unfortunate,’ said Mr Gifford, gravely, and a kindly, almost a tender expression stole into his eyes as he spoke.

He was a man of about thirty-three years of age, and fairly good-looking. His father, Mr Gifford, senior, was, and had been for half a century, the

principal lawyer of the country town of Suffold, in the Midlands, where this conversation took place. George Gifford, the speaker, was his father's partner, and only son, and the Giffords were supposed to be people in good circumstances, and were, in consequence, very generally esteemed.

The girl—the client standing before George Gifford, listening to the unsatisfactory state of her circumstances, was a young woman of twenty-two. A young woman tall and well formed, with an expressive, handsome face, and a proud and distinguished bearing. But what struck you most about Laura Ingram was a certain flash and light in her dark eyes that told of mental power of rare development. No ordinary girl this, you felt, as

she stood there hearing of her poverty without flinching; and her bravery touched a responsive note in George Gifford's heart.

‘It is very little,’ he said.

‘Yes; but enough to keep me from starving until I can make my own living,’ replied Laura Ingram.

‘But—’ hesitated the lawyer, ‘what do you think of doing? It is so difficult for women to make their way, and a girl brought up as you have been—’

‘I know, but I mean to try.’

George Gifford did not speak for a moment or two. He crossed the room restlessly; he stood looking out of the window at the deserted garden below, where the nipping breezes of late October had thinned the leaves

and smote with a destroying hand the fading flowers.

‘Miss Ingram — Laura,’ he said at length, looking round and fixing his eyes on the handsome, resolute face of the tall girl, standing in her long black gown by the fire, thinking of her future fate; ‘there is something I wish to say to you. It may be too soon—but still—’

‘What is it, Mr Gifford?’ answered Laura Ingram, calmly.

‘It is this,’ and George Gifford turned from the window and went to the hearth, ‘I can’t bear to think of you doing anything; of you going out alone into the world. Do not go! I have a home to offer you, and I offer it to you with all my heart.’

‘You mean—’ and Laura Ingram’s

face flushed, and then grew a little pale.

‘I mean will you be my wife?’ and George Gifford took her hand. ‘My father, I know, will be pleased to welcome you at Red House. He wishes me to marry, and since my poor mother’s death we have both felt the sad want of a woman’s presence at home. If you will come—’ but something in her face here made him pause.

‘It is very kind of you, Mr Gifford,’ she said, gravely, and she gently withdrew her hand from his as she spoke; ‘more than kind to speak such words to an almost penniless girl like me—but it cannot be.’

‘But why?’ asked George Gifford, eagerly.

‘Because I mean to try a different life than the one I could lead here. You have offered me a comfortable home, and, I am sure, a good husband, but I do not wish to stay at Suffold.

‘Do—you dislike me?’ said George Gifford, with faltering lips.

‘On the contrary, I like you better than anyone I know. But I am not fit, Mr Gifford, for a life in a country town. I chafe and fret here! I want to see the world and the great people in it; I want, in fact, to live, and not to vegetate.’

‘But, my poor girl, how can you do that on three hundred pounds?’

‘Of course I cannot. The three hundred pounds will pay my way until I do something else.’

‘But think of the struggle—a struggle of which you know nothing—before either man or woman succeeds in a profession they have to make. It is different stepping into a business made by your father, as I have done; but the truth is, everything untried has to be fought for in the world.’

‘I mean to fight,’ answered Laura, with a smile.

‘But what do you mean to try?’

‘I can write, I can paint, and there is the stage always open to me.’

‘The stage! Surely you would not go on the stage!’

‘Why not, Mr Gifford? It’s better reciting the thoughts of great minds, in my opinion, than listening to and answering the thoughts of small ones. Here the people talk of the most trivial

things! Who dined with the other; what they had for dinner; the fights with their servants. Now, is it not so?’

‘Yet these great minds you talk of no doubt also fight, or fought with their servants.’

Laura laughed.

‘Perhaps so,’ she said; ‘they were, or are, human, and servants are so aggravating. But they have other and loftier themes, and I want to hear really clever people talk, and to see them.’

‘You will be disappointed.’

‘Please do not try to disenchant me!’

‘Then you mean, I suppose, to go to London?’

‘Yes.’

‘And have you any friends there? Any introductions?’

‘Not one!’

‘Miss Ingram—may I say Laura—forgive me, but it is most rash.’

‘You must always run risks to gain anything. I mean to try, Mr Gifford, and if I fail—’

‘At least promise to let me know. Will you promise to remember that whether you fail or succeed, you have a sincere friend in a despised county town?’

‘You are very kind!’ she answered, and for a moment her face softened, and she held out her hand, which Gifford took. ‘I will promise,’ she went on, faintly smiling, ‘to let you know if I succeed, but—’

‘No, no; in failure I might be, I

could be, of some use to you; and I entreat you do not let any foolish pride prevent your applying to me.'

Again her face softened. She looked at the good-looking man at her side; the man with his earnest truth-telling eyes fixed on her face. A half doubt stole into her heart. She knew very well he loved her; knew a honourable home would be hers if she chose to accept it. But on the other hand—

'I do not love him; I could not do my duty; I would weary of my life,' she whispered to her heart. And these thoughts, as they passed swiftly through her brain, decided her.

'It is very good of you to say so,' she said, still half smiling, 'and if I am driven to desperation, if I am

thinking of blowing out my brains, or jumping into the Thames, I will remember—my friend in the country town.'

He pressed her hand; his lips quivered, and then he turned away.

'Thank you,' he said briefly, and a moment or two later he left the room and the house, and Laura Ingram was alone.

'Poor fellow!' she thought; 'but it would never do.'

Yet she felt sorry; sorry to have given pain, though she did not wish her words unsaid. She was ambitious, but not with mean ambitions; she felt, in fact, as she had told him, that a life in a country town would never satisfy the cravings of her heart. Still she liked George Gifford;

but liking is not love. One is as the stream gurgling on its placid way; the other the deep sea in its resistless force.

This meeting took place late in the afternoon, and soon after dark a letter with an enclosure was brought to Miss Ingram from Mr Gifford. She knew his handwriting, and opened it quickly and with interest. The envelope contained a letter and a key, the letter consisting of the following words :—

‘DEAR MISS INGRAM,—During our meeting this afternoon I forgot to return to you the key of your poor father’s escritoire, with which you intrusted me so that I might examine his papers. I regret deeply that I

could not give a more favourable account of his affairs than I did, and I have arranged his liabilities (as far as these papers acquainted me with them) in one packet, and his assets in another, and it would be well that you should look them over. There is also in the escritoire a sealed letter addressed to yourself, which, of course, I left untouched.

‘I need scarcely repeat to you what I said to-day, yet I will do so ; which is, that if ever you require a friend I hope you will not forget a very sincere one. And I remain always,—Yours faithfully,

‘GEO. GIFFORD.’

Laura Ingram read this letter sitting by the fire, where it had been

brought to her, and then rose hastily.

‘A sealed letter,’ she repeated half aloud ; and then she began to think of her father and his last years and days.

A strange, gloomy and eccentric man had been this Major Ingram, who had passed away from his earthly troubles some three months ago, and left his young daughter alone in the world. Laura never could understand her father, nor account for his habitual moroseness. Yet he had given her a good education, and afterwards brought her to an uncongenial home. He was not rich, and had never been rich, yet he was careless about money, and his expenditure had always exceeded his income. The consequence was debts and unpleasantness of all sorts, and when

Laura had ventured to remonstrate, Major Ingram had answered testily,—

‘What matter is it?’

And thus things had drifted on until the summons came he was forced to heed. He died as he had lived, and only his young daughter shed tears by the dead man’s side. She had not loved him, but he was her father, and she had never before witnessed the last struggles of a parting soul. It was not a peaceful death-bed; some grim memories seemed to haunt the dying Major, and he had cried out more than once, as if addressing an invisible presence whom he still defied.

All this had left a very painful impression on Laura Ingram’s mind, and she had shrank from going into his

affairs, and had deputed her father's lawyers, the Giffords, to do so. Old Mr Gifford rarely left his home, and therefore George Gifford had acted in the matter, and had thus been thrown a good deal with Laura, whom he already pitied and admired.

But after reading his letter Laura felt that she must face the painful duty that lay before her. She must read her father's last letter, and she therefore lit a candle for the purpose of proceeding to his room. She was alone in the house, except one servant, and she slightly shuddered as she went up the chill, silent staircase. Then she came to the locked door of the room where the Major had died. She had brought the key up with her, and she shuddered again as

she placed it in the lock. She turned it, and entered the dark room beyond. A sort of superstitious feeling crept over her, but still she went on. She placed the candle on the table, and approached the escritoire, and stood looking at it. It was of some dark wood, and brass bound. It bore the marks of age and travel, and looked a fit receptacle for hidden things.

The girl turned pale, and glanced somewhat fearfully round the room, lit by the faint and fitful candle light. There seemed to her excited imagination to be a shadow in one corner; a reflection, doubtless, of the heavy window curtains, the next moment she told herself. She pulled herself together; she unlocked the escritoire,

she went for the candle to examine its contents.

These consisted of two packets of letters, neatly labelled in George Gifford's handwriting, with which she was familiar. 'Unpaid bills,' was on one. 'Assets,' on the other. Laura scarcely glanced at these. Her eyes were fixed on a large envelope in the centre, addressed to herself.

'For my daughter Laura; to be opened after I am dead.'

This was the letter Mr Gifford had told her of. She hastily put out her hand and snatched it up. She placed the candle on the ledge of the escritoire, and tore it open.

She read the first lines, and a cry escaped her quivering lips. She read on, and her face grew white with

horror, her eyes dilated, and her breath came short.

‘My God! it cannot—it cannot be!’ she muttered.

Yes, there, in her father’s handwriting—there, lying before her, was the hideous secret of his life, the damning self-evidence of his sin! Again Laura cried out; she put her hand to her face; and in doing so must have touched the ledge of the escritoire, for suddenly the candle fell from it on the floor, and the light was extinguished in doing so.

She was a brave girl; she was in complete darkness, but she was one of those whose courage rise in an emergency, and with swift, sure footsteps, she at once left the room, going to her own, which was on the same landing,

carrying the letter she had just read in her hand.

She was going for a fresh light, which she quickly procured, and then again she read the letter from the dead; the words that had blanched her face, and left an indelible shadow on her heart.

CHAPTER II.

FIRST WORDS.

A MONTH later Laura Ingram was sitting, one sunny day early in the afternoon, at her easel in the National Gallery, copying with no unequal hand that masterpiece, to those who love his kind, 'A Distinguished Member of the Humane Society.'

She was sketching the grand head, the proud, sagacious eyes, and was so absorbed in her work that she never

noticed that she had attracted the attention of a young man — not one of the students—who was standing a little behind her watching her supple fingers, and admiring the profile of her face.

This girl in black, with her fine form and resolute expression, seemed to this young man to be unlike, somehow, any other of her sex that he had ever seen. He had looked on fairer women, but Laura Ingram, with her clear brown skin, and straight dark brows, and clever eyes, was to him as one apart. He stood behind her unnoticed for a few minutes, and then moved on, glancing carelessly at the other groups of students, and stopping to admire a picture here and there, for he was a great lover of art, and

then he returned to watch the stranger painting the noble dog.

She never raised her head. He was in front of her now, and could see her full face more distinctly, and he read there, as he looked with those keen eyes of his, that there was a shadow on her heart. He saw her lips quiver once, and an impatient sigh, which she checked, rose on her lips. She interested him greatly. He was a student of human nature, and this clever face caught his fancy. He began speculating about her in his mind. Was she a love-lorn damsel, he asked himself with a smile, or did some husband of her youth lie in his untimely grave?

He lingered about the galleries till closing time came, and he watched the

black-robed figure still, and saw her consign her canvas to one of the attendants, and then put on her hat, fasten some rich fur round her throat, and leave the Gallery. He made haste to follow her. She descended the steps outside still without looking round; she hailed a cab, and she was gone.

‘But next students’ day I will see her, I suppose, if I come—but what folly it is,’ he thought, and he smiled cynically.

He was tall and dark, with a face some might call good-looking, some plain. A powerful face, thin and lined, and pale, and yet he was young. Perhaps seven-and-twenty at the utmost, and he looked a man of strong feelings and masterful will.

He walked round one side of Trafalgar Square—he was going to meet a friend at one of the hotels in Northumberland Avenue—but still this girl's clear-cut, proud face haunted him.

‘I must find out who she is,’ at last he decided, and when he made up his mind about anything he was not one to change.

Accordingly, the next students' day at the Gallery found him once more in the vicinity of Laura Ingram's easel. Again he looked at her graceful, bent head and oval cheek, which he could see from where he stood, but again with the same result. She took not the slightest notice of him; in fact, never noticed him, and the effect of this was that he became more anxious still to see something more of her.

The way he effected this must now be told.

On the third working day after he had first seen her, Laura found, on her arrival at the Gallery, on going up to the picture she was copying, that another student had also set up his easel there, and was apparently busily engaged in copying the noble dog.

He was a dark young man, and he said something courteous on the attendant placing Laura's easel, that he hoped he was not in her way.

She answered gravely and courteously, also, that he was not in the least. And then, without another word, settled to her work.

An hour passed, and she never once looked at anything except the picture and her canvas. The dark

young man also worked, and made a quick and masterly sketch, but he also found time to look very often at his handsome neighbour. But she was apparently unconscious of this, and at last this had such an irritating effect on his temper that he rose hastily, and, either by design or accident, passed so close to Laura's easel that he touched it, and Laura naturally looked up.

'I beg your pardon, a thousand pardons,' he said. 'I am ashamed of my stupidity.'

'You have luckily done no harm,' answered Laura, with a smile.

'I hope not; may I look at your work?'

'Certainly.'

The young man stood for a few

moments and looked at Laura's copy critically. Then he looked at the girl herself.

'You are an artist, I perceive?' he said.

'I wish to be one, at least.'

'Then your wish will soon be realised. This is a splendid copy as far as it has gone, and you have chosen a fine subject.'

'It is one that interests me,' said Laura, looking also critically at her work, and moving a little back so that she could get a better view.

'You are a lover of animals then, I presume, and of dogs in particular.'

'I love and pity all animals; their wrongs are one of the miseries of my life.'

‘Well, I own to a strong desire to lay a horsewhip over the shoulders of some of the brutes who ill-treat them. But I am stopping your work. I trust you will forgive my awkwardness in accidentally touching your easel.’

He raised his hat as he spoke, and Laura bowed gravely, and then he moved away, nor did he return to his easel while she was there. His face had rather interested her; it was so strong, so intellectual, and his eyes were full of thought.

‘I wonder if he is an artist?’ she reflected, and before she left the Gallery she went round and looked at his unfinished sketch.

Every line told how well he knew his work. Laura began to be dis-

satisfied with her own copy after looking at his.

3 'I wonder if he will finish it,' she thought, and a day or two later she found that he intended to do so. She found him, in fact, at work when she arrived at the Gallery, and he took off his hat and bowed when Laura approached her easel. In common courtesy she returned this, and thus an acquaintance was established between them. But he did not intrude on this. He saw this proud, self-contained girl was not one to rush lightly into an intimacy with a stranger. He allowed her quite time enough to get accustomed to him; to exchange a few words with him, and not to be afraid that he would encroach because she permitted him to speak to her.

And thus gradually the barriers were broken down between them, and still they did not know each other's names. But one day he asked her rather a personal question.

‘Are you a Londoner?’ he said.

Laura shook her head.

‘No,’ she answered, ‘I come from a country town in the Midlands.’

‘A country town,’ he repeated, smiling; ‘and what is life like in a country town?’

‘Dreary and stupid in the extreme; at least I thought so.’

‘The young ladies, I presume, make an idol of the curate.’

‘There was not even that source of amusement at my country town, for the curate was married.’

‘Then what did you do?’

‘I tried to do a lot of things. I tried to write, to paint, to sing. I never meant to remain in the place. I had no interest there, except—’

‘I presume some relative, some parent?’

‘Yes,’ answered Laura, and the young man, looking at her, saw her face suddenly grow pale; ‘my father lived there, and at his death I came here.’

‘Forgive me if I have mentioned a painful subject.’

Laura did not answer. She bent her head lower over her canvas, and her lips quivered, but she made no other sign of pain or grief. Then presently the young man began to speak of other things. He asked what she had written, and if she had had anything published.

‘No, I have not,’ said Laura.

‘Have you tried?’

‘Yes, I have tried.’

‘It’s always difficult at first; I wonder if I could help you? I know a fellow who is editor of one of the society magazines; in fact, I know two men who have some influence. Shall I try?’

‘It is very kind of you, and I should feel very grateful; of course an introduction is so much.’

‘Not always,’ answered the dark young man, with a smile. ‘But will you bring one of your stories here—I presume they are stories that you write?’

‘Yes.’

‘And I will try to find a landing-place for it. If you write as well as you paint you will do.’

‘I shall be very pleased if it is so, for it is necessary I should do something to earn my own living,’ added Laura, with a sort of proud humility.

The young man made no remark on this communication. He began to talk of literature, and Laura perceived he was well and extensively read, and that his taste was good.

‘I ought to tell you my name,’ he said, suddenly; ‘it is Woodland—Ralph Woodland. May I ask yours?’

‘I am called Laura Ingram,’ answered Laura, with a quick blush.

‘Then, Miss Ingram, if you will bring me one of your stories on Friday, I will see what I can do with it.’

‘Thank you very much. And now I think I must go.’

‘Let me escort you outside, and first give your work in charge. It was raining tremendously when I came in.’

‘But I am giving you so much trouble.’

‘Not at all. Ah, here is the fellow who will take care of your picture. Now we can go.’

They walked through the Galleries together; Laura, like all young authors, naturally anxious to please anyone who was going to try to dispose of one of her stories. And when they got outside they found it was blowing a tempest, and raining in torrents, mingled with sleet.

‘What a fearful day,’ said Laura. ‘I must get a cab.’

‘No, let me drive you home in my brougham; it is waiting down there. You would get wet in a cab.

‘Oh, thanks; but I should rather go in a cab.’

‘Let me over-persuade you. Come,’ and he offered her his hand to assist her down the wet and slippery steps, and as he did so a neat and well-appointed brougham drew up at the base.

But Laura shrank back.

‘Indeed, I should rather go in a cab,’ she said.

‘Oh, no, let me hand you in. Where shall I drive you?’

‘I lodge in Maddox Street, off Regent Street,’ answered Laura, who was beginning to be afraid of thus

being taken possession of against her will.

‘Maddox Street,’ cried her companion to the coachman, who touched his hat.

‘Yes, Sir Ralph,’ he answered.

Laura heard this, and looked round inquiringly as she took her seat in the brougham, but ‘Sir Ralph’ made no remark. He drove her to Maddox Street, talking quietly on the way, and when they arrived at the house she directed him to, he left the brougham and handed Laura out.

‘By-the-bye, I may as well give you my card,’ he said, as they stood a moment or two on the pavement together after he had rung the house door bell.

‘Thank you,’ said Laura, as he pro-

duced his card-case and placed a card in her hand. Then he took off his hat and re-entered the brougham, and was driven away.

When he had disappeared, and as Laura entered the narrow passage of the house she glanced at the card she held. On it was engraved—

SIR RALPH WOODLAND, BART.,
RATHBOURNE HALL,
YORKS.

There was also his club in town, and so at length Laura knew who her acquaintance actually was.

‘Sir Ralph Woodland,’ she repeated over as she entered her small back sitting-room, for, though she was living in what is called ‘a good neighbourhood,’ her apartments were by no means either large or luxurious. She had gone to

this house because she had once been there with her father, and she had written to the people who kept it when she wished to leave Suffolk, as they were the only rooms she knew anything of in town. She had told them she wished for two small rooms, and she had certainly got them. They both looked back, yet she paid highly for them, and was beginning to consider that she had better seek out a cheaper home.

‘Woodland!’ Where had she heard the name? Suddenly a flush rose to her face, and her hands began to tremble. In a corner of the room stood the brass-bound escritoire which had formerly been her father’s, and which she had brought with her to London. She sought her keys; she

unlocked it with strange interest, and once more drew out the letter which her father had left her to be read after his death.

Again she opened it, and almost the same look of horror and pain spread over her face as when she had first read the dead man's words.

Woodland! The name occurred more than once in the closely-written pages; a name loaded with bitter execrations by the writer. 'But for this scoundrel Woodland,' Laura read in one line. 'The accursed Woodland only met his just reward,' in another. Laura turned faint and cold. Could this dead Woodland be any relation of the live Woodland from whom she had just parted? It might be; there was at least a doubt, and this doubt filled

Laura's heart with a strange dread shrinking.

‘I had better not see him any more,’ she thought, ‘and yet—’ He was the one acquaintance she had made in town; the one among the vast multitudes by whom she was surrounded. She had felt it inexpressibly dreary when she had first arrived. Almost bewildering, this rush of human life which knew no end. And then Sir Ralph Woodland had offered to try to find her an opening for her literary work. It was throwing away a chance which might not occur again if she did not see this young man any more. And, moreover, she liked him. There was something in his clever face which took her fancy. At all events, it ended in her going to the National Gallery

on Friday, as they had arranged, carrying the MS. of what she considered her best story with her.

She was disappointed not to find Sir Ralph Woodland in his accustomed place, and sat down to her easel with a somewhat chill feeling in her heart. She looked round more than once, but still he did not appear. She was beginning to think he did not mean to come, when she heard a quick footfall near her, and looking hastily up she saw him standing by her side. Laura was conscious that she blushed, and that her manner was confused.

‘Good morning, Miss Ingram,’ said Sir Ralph, holding out his hand. ‘Well, have you brought the story?’

‘Yes,’ answered Laura, with some nervousness.

‘That is right. I asked my editor friend to dinner yesterday for the purpose of softening his heart.’

Laura smiled brightly.

‘You may smile, but we are all influenced by these small attentions, even when we perceive their motive. My editor doubtless saw through mine, as I had never asked him to dinner before; yet it made him more genial. He promised, in fact, to read your story, and to consider it favourably—if he could.’

‘Ah — if he could!’ said Laura, quickly.

‘There is always an “if,” you know, in these things. But,’ and he glanced at Laura’s copy as he spoke, ‘you have

not been working very hard to-day, I see?’

‘No, indeed, I have not; I have been thinking—well, of the fate of my story.’

‘Suppose you take a holiday to-day, then, and let us walk together through the galleries for a while.’

Laura felt it would be wiser not to go, but the temptation proved too strong for her. She, however, hesitated; but Sir Ralph, in that masterful way of his, did not seem to perceive this. He led her from gallery to gallery, pointing out as they went what most struck his fancy. He was clever. There was a sort of graphic picturesqueness in his phrases which pleased Laura’s ears, though he aimed at no effect. He had travelled, and spoke of what he

had seen easily and well, and altogether was undoubtedly an agreeable companion when it pleased him to be so.

The time passed swiftly for Laura, but suddenly she looked up quickly and eagerly in his face.

‘Have you,’ she said, with a sort of nervous anxiety in her voice which she could not suppress, ‘ever been in India?’

‘How strange that you should ask me that question,’ answered Sir Ralph, smiling. ‘Is there anything oriental in my appearance except my dark skin? Yes, I have been in India; my early days were spent there; but on my father’s tragic death I returned to England.’

‘Tragic?’ repeated Laura, in a low,

sharp tone of pain, and her face paled.

‘Yes. He was supposed to be murdered—but it is a painful subject, let us change it.’

Laura said nothing more. But her interest in the pictures and her companion’s conversation visibly flagged, and a few minutes later she proposed to leave the Gallery.

‘I will see you home, then,’ said Sir Ralph, quietly, and he did, though Laura scarcely made any answer to this offer, and spoke but little on their way to Maddox Street. But when they reached it, their arrival there created quite a little sensation.

Two young ladies were looking out of the drawing-room windows of the house where Laura lived, watching

their luggage being carried in, for they were new arrivals, and when Sir Ralph and Laura neared the door they both instantly recognised Sir Ralph.

‘Why, Patty!’ cried one, ‘look, there is Ralph Woodland!’

‘So it is,’ answered the other, excitedly. ‘Who is the girl, I wonder, he is with? See, she is coming in here. Can she live here? Really, this is very funny that we should see him on the very first day.’

‘He is not coming in. They are shaking hands. Well, we must find out all about the girl.’

CHAPTER III.

PATTY.

THE two young ladies who had such a strong interest in the unexpected appearance of Sir Ralph Woodland were both good-looking girls, the one bearing the name of 'Patty' considering herself, and being sometimes considered, a beauty.

They were half - sisters, and their names Patrica and Ella May. They were the daughters of the late Colonel May, and had been sent, when young

girls, from India by their father to his only sister, Mrs Phillips, who was the widow of a country clergyman. Mrs Phillips, who had no children, was only too delighted to receive the two lively Anglo-Indians, who brightened her home by their prattle, and altogether cheered her life.

Her husband, the Rev. John Phillips, had died a year before her nieces arrived, but she had continued to live in the vicarage at Laytonside by the favour of the patron of the living, Sir Ralph Woodland, who had been a pupil in the days of his boyhood of the late vicar. The present vicar, Mr Snowe, was an unmarried man, and preferred living in rooms to the cares of a household. This arrangement, therefore, suited both Mrs Phillips and

Mr Snowe, and it lasted for six years, and only ended at Mrs Phillips' death.

In the meanwhile the two pretty girls at the vicarage had caused a good deal of gossip in the village of Laytonside. A struggling village this, with a green in the centre, and three or four good houses standing back from it. The doctor lived in one of these, and had two ordinary-looking daughters, who did not admire the Anglo-Indians, and thought them what they called 'forward.' But if the Misses Williams did not admire them, the vicar, Mr Snowe, did. He was a good-looking man, portly, comely and rosy, and he fell a victim, almost from the first time he saw her, to the charms of Patrica (Patty) May.

She was, in truth, an attractive young

woman, with her tall, slender, well-made form, her abundant golden hair, and her fairly pretty features. Her nose had a little tilt at the end, which Mr Snowe thought perfection, but which her enemies did not.

‘She is always trying to attract men,’ the Misses Williams said, and, it must be admitted, with some truth. When, therefore, one day the young landlord of the greater part of Laytonside, and the owner of Rathbourne Hall—the big house standing about a mile from the village—called on the widow of his old tutor, Mrs Phillips, at the vicarage, Patty felt she was no longer wasting her time.

Sir Ralph Woodland had been abroad for the three years that the girls had already lived with their aunt

when he appeared, and thus he had never seen, nor indeed heard of them. But they had heard of him, and their aunt had often talked of him, and wondered when he would return. When he was ushered into the old-fashioned drawing-room, therefore, his surprise was great to find a handsome, yellow-haired girl sitting by the open window, reading a novel, instead of the white-capped widow he expected to see.

But Patty was quite equal to the occasion. She rose from her lowly seat by the window with the supple grace which was one of her charms, and bowed smilingly.

‘Sir Ralph Woodland?’ she said. ‘My aunt, I know, will be charmed to see you; she has often spoken of you.’

Sir Ralph bowed, and looked, also smilingly, at the gracious blue-clad figure before him.

‘Then,’ he said, ‘you are Mrs Phillips’ niece?’

‘Yes, Patrica May,’ answered Patty; ‘you have been so long away, Sir Ralph, that you do not know anything that has happened here for absolutely years! Do you know that my sister and I have lived, or rather been buried, here already for three years!’

‘Then may I ask,’ replied Sir Ralph, ‘where you lived before you were buried?’

Patty laughed sweetly, and flung back her shapely head.

‘In India,’ she said; ‘but my sister took fever, and then my poor father died, so here we had to stay.’

‘And you find it very dull?’

‘I should think so! A country village!’

‘Well, certainly Laytonside is not a very lively place.’

‘It is simply awful; and then the little quarrels and jealousies! All the women here hate me, Sir Ralph!’

‘I do not wonder at that.’

Again Patty laughed.

‘Ah, I see,’ she said, ‘you understand things. I hope you—but here is my aunt.’

The widow entered at this moment, and warmly welcomed the young man, who had been her husband’s pupil, and who had allowed her to live rent free so long.

‘This is my niece, Patrica May,’ she said, introducing Patty. ‘My poor

dear brother, Colonel May, died very suddenly in India, and his girls were with me when it happened, and now this is their home; they are a great comfort to me.'

'I am sure they must be,' answered Sir Ralph, and for a moment his eyes rested on Patty's face with a look of suppressed amusement, which she quite understood.

Such was the beginning of an acquaintance which had gone on nearly three years, when Patty and Ella May recognised Sir Ralph Woodland from the windows of the house in Maddox Street, just as he was parting with Laura Ingram.

It was an acquaintance which for a time flourished vigorously, and then the young man cooled, and finally again

went abroad, and only occasionally appeared at Rathbourne Hall. He had admired Patrica May at first, and Patrica had decided to be Lady Woodland, but she over-shot her mark. She, in fact, was too frank, and made Sir Ralph feel that he had no need to woo, and he was not a man to be won by such advances. So he went away, and when he was away Patty amused herself with the vicar, to the disgust of the rest of his female parishioners.

But she had no idea of becoming Mrs Snowe, and be 'cutting out flannel petticoats for the poor all my life,' she confided to her sister Ella.

'I am sure Sir Ralph likes me,' she also confided; 'there must be something prevents his proposing to me; but I

believe it will all come right in the end.'

She, in fact, never gave up the idea.

Sir Ralph came and went away ; and then, as time progressed, her aunt, Mrs Phillips, died, and the home at the vicarage of Laytonside was broken up.

Mr Snowe again and again asked Patty to become its mistress and remain there, but Patty always sweetly declined.

'I am not good enough to be a clergyman's wife,' she said, looking gently in the vicar's face, as if she regretted her shortcomings. It was her nature, in fact, to try to please every man she came near. Even the doctor's ugly little son was smiled upon by Patty May when no one else was by. And

when, after their aunt's death, it was found that both the girls were left fairly well off, young Mr Williams proposed to Patty, as well as the vicar.

But she would have none of him.

She had made up her mind, and meant to carry out her purpose. Sir Ralph Woodland was living at this time in town, and to town Patty meant to go.

The vicar bought the furniture at the vicarage just as it stood, and this put a little additional ready money into Patty's pocket, and she intended to spend it. They had, moreover, about two hundred a year each, and were thus able to live where they pleased.

Patty, however, did not quarrel with her admirers at Laytonside. She left the vicar with the impression that she

would return, and looked softly also at young Mr Williams when she parted with him.

Then the two girls started for London, and on the first day of their arrival there saw the very person whom they had gone to seek.

They watched Sir Ralph Woodland part with Laura Ingram in the street below, and then Patty hastily, and in a state of great excitement, rang the room bell. This was answered in a moment or two by the smart little maid of the establishment.

‘Who is that young lady that has just come in?’ asked Patty.

‘Oh, miss, that is Miss Ingram,’ answered the maid.

‘Does she live here?’ went on Patty.

‘Yes, miss, she does; she has the back parlour and the back bedroom.’

‘And—does anyone come to see her?’ inquired Patty, with heightened colour. ‘Any gentlemen?’

‘No, miss; she’s one of the hartist sort, I think, and paints or writes all day. Once a gentleman brought her ’ome in a carriage, though.’

‘Ah—’ said Patty, and she drew a long breath, and when the maid was gone she turned to her sister Ella.

‘Where can he have picked her up?’ she said.

Ella May was not so striking-looking as Patty, nor were her characteristics so marked. She was two years younger, and the daughter of a different mother. But still there was a

sort of resemblance between them, for they had both abundant fair hair, the bright golden tint of which was produced by art; they had also pretty much the same views of life, meaning to do well in it, and looking at it from no very elevated standpoint.

‘It was certainly Ralph Woodland,’ said Ella, in answer to her sister’s remark.

‘No doubt about it,’ replied Patty, decidedly. ‘We must get to know this girl, Ella; must pick up her acquaintance somehow.’

‘How can we do that?’

‘Oh, run up against her on the stairs—anyhow! We must do it, and then through her we will get hold of Sir Ralph. Perhaps,’ added Patty, thoughtfully, ‘she has stood in the

way all this time—I always thought it might be some woman.’

‘Perhaps. She seemed good-looking.’

‘She was dark, wasn’t she? Well, dark or fair, she sha’n’t have Ralph Woodland, if I can help it.’

The girl whom these two free-spoken young women were discussing was, in the meanwhile, standing in her back sitting-room with a pained and very strained expression on her face. She also was thinking of Sir Ralph Woodland; thinking of his father’s tragic death, and of the dark suspicion which haunted her own mind concerning it.

‘And he is so kind, so clever,’ she reflected wistfully; ‘taking so much trouble about my story—it is very sad—if—it be true; but it may not be.’

And she sighed.

Then she sat down and tried to compose another story, but somehow she could not concentrate her mind to her work. She was restless and excited, and in no mood to create joys and sorrows, when her own heart was so disturbed and ill at ease.

Presently she rose and began walking slowly up and down the little room with her hands clasped loosely together at her back.

‘There might be a hundred Woodlands,’ she was telling herself; but the dark face of the Woodland she knew seemed to haunt her. His thoughts did, most certainly. He had left her unwillingly, and as he proceeded to the publisher’s office, to which he meant to take her manuscript, his mind

was dwelling on her the whole time.

‘A noble face,’ he was telling himself; ‘I wonder what made her brow so suddenly cloud, and her manner change? Can she care for anyone? She is a woman who could care most deeply, I am certain. Well, he’ll be a lucky fellow, whoever it is. A woman like that is worth winning, worth wooing; not like the girls who make a rush at one if you say a civil word to them.’ And Sir Ralph thought a little scornfully at this moment of Miss Patty May. Then presently he reached the office for which he was bound. He had written articles for the magazine which was published here—articles clever, concise, and always readable—and he was well received by rather a good-looking,

well-dressed young man, who was the editor, but whose face, nevertheless, did not show much intellectual ability. But Mr Valentine Ross was essentially what is called 'smart.' Quick to perceive power in others, to seek them out, and not pay over highly for their work. He knew, in fact, what he was about, and steered his course fairly successfully.

'Ah, Sir Ralph,' he said, rising from his seat, with outstretched hand, 'so you are bringing me the story by the fair authoress you told me of last night?'

'The lady cannot be called a fair authoress; she is dark,' replied Sir Ralph, a little grimly.

'But handsome? Don't tell me she is not, my good friend!' laughed Mr Valentine Ross. 'I know you; a plain

woman's scribblings would never have weighed down your coat-pocket.'

'But I don't expect they are scribblings; the young lady is decidedly clever.'

'But they all think they are clever, and the rot I have sent here for my approval is simply appalling. However, let me have the story, and for your sake, if I can publish it, I will.'

'Thanks, very much,' said Sir Ralph, producing from his coat-pocket the neat roll of manuscript that had cost Laura Ingram so much time and trouble.

Mr Valentine Ross untied the string, and read the first few lines.

'Doesn't seem altogether bad,' he said, critically.

'I am sure you will not find it alto-

gether bad. She is a girl with a great deal of mental power, and paints also remarkably well.'

'Do you mean her face?' smiled Mr Ross, looking up.

Sir Ralph felt unreasonably angry, though with that power of restraint which he had over his feelings he did not show this.

'No,' he said, quietly; 'not her face, but her canvas.'

'For my own part,' replied the smiling, fair-complexioned young man before him, 'I like women who paint their faces; it shows such a desire to please us.'

'Miss Ingram doesn't need paint, she has a clear, rather olive - tinted skin.'

'I declare, Woodland, I believe you

are pretty far gone!’ laughed Mr Ross.

‘Well, suppose we leave sentiment and complexions and go to business,’ said Sir Ralph. ‘If you accept this story you will, of course, pay for it?’

Mr Ross shrugged his shoulders.

‘Heaps of stories, my dear fellow, are published that are not worth paying for.’

‘I am sure you will find this one will be worth paying for.’

‘All in good time, then. To please you, I will take it home to-night and look it over, and can let you know to-morrow what I think.’

‘Then I will call about this time to-morrow to hear your opinion,’ said Sir Ralph, rising. ‘Good-bye, Ross;

much obliged for the trouble you have taken.'

'Always glad to do anything for a friend,' smiled Mr Ross, taking the hand that was extended to him, and pressing it warmly. 'Will be glad to see you to-morrow, Woodland.'

But scarcely had the door closed behind Sir Ralph when Mr Valentine Ross openly yawned.

'What a bore it is,' he said, half aloud. 'Well, such is life.'

CHAPTER IV.

FIRST EARNINGS.

THE next day, however, Mr Ross again received Sir Ralph in the most friendly fashion. He was a young man, in truth, who liked to be on pleasant terms with those who held a certain position in the world. Sir Ralph was a baronet, was well off, and moved in good society when he cared to go into it, and Mr Valentine Ross respected him accordingly.

‘Well,’ he said, after shaking hands with him, ‘it will do.’

‘Miss Ingram’s story?’ inquired Sir Ralph, with unmistakable interest.

‘Yes, Miss Ingram’s story,’ replied Mr Ross. ‘It shows promise; yes, decidedly promise.’

‘I’m glad,’ said Sir Ralph heartily.

‘Yes, there is more in her than the clear olive skin, my friend,’ continued Mr Ross, with that curious little laugh of his. ‘I do not say she is a genius, but the young woman is clever.’

‘I knew she was.’

‘Of course, she’s got a good deal to learn. Novelists aren’t ready made, you know. But they must have something original to go upon or they’ll do nothing. They can’t learn it all, however hard they try, but still they have a lot to learn.’

‘I suppose she’ll soon pick it all up.’

‘Probably ; and now tell me who she is, and all about her?’

Sir Ralph looked annoyed.

‘She is a young lady for whom I have great respect,’ he said. ‘Will you publish her story soon, Ross?’

‘In a couple of months or so ; I’m full up till then.’

‘And what will you pay for it?’

‘Isn’t it too soon to talk about that?’

‘No ; I want to know.’

Mr Ross began counting the pages of Laura Ingram’s story, which was lying before him, and then the words in a page, and afterwards made a brief mental calculation, and then named a remarkably small price.

‘That is very little,’ said Sir Ralph, in a dissatisfied tone.

‘Our usual terms to new beginners, my dear fellow. Can’t tell how they turn out; and one bad story does a magazine harm.’

‘I don’t think this one will.’

‘I hope not, but I can’t tell. Come, Woodland, not many young women get their stories accepted the first time they offer them; and but for your sake, my friend, I’ll tell you candidly, I should never have looked at it.’

‘Very well,’ said Sir Ralph, after a moment’s consideration. ‘But we must have better terms for the next, Ross.’

‘Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof,’ answered Ross, with an affected sigh.

Sir Ralph laughed a short laugh, and soon afterwards left the office, and, calling a cab, drove in the direction of

Laura Ingram's rooms. And as he went on his way he also made a small mental calculation. The money which Mr Ross had proposed to give for Laura's story was unequal money, Mr Ross paying so much a page. It came to under five pounds, but Sir Ralph decided he would make it straight.

'She will never know,' he thought, kindly, 'and it will please her to receive her first earnings. Ross must pay me;' and he smiled, and his dark marked face looked almost handsome as he did so.

Then when he reached Maddox Street he left the cab, and was speedily ringing at the door of the house where Laura Ingram lived. Patty May, in the drawing-room, heard his ring, and ran to the win-

dow, but was too late to see who it was. She, however, heard someone enter the house, and hurried out of the room and went on the staircase, and looked over the banisters. There she saw Sir Ralph Woodland following the maid, who rapped at the back sitting-room door, which a moment later Sir Ralph entered.

Patty's heart beat fast, and her cheeks grew pale. She really cared for Sir Ralph, though in the beginning she had cared chiefly for his title and fortune. But gradually—as he drew back—she had learnt to like the man himself, and was determined to win him. To see him, then, visiting another woman was not pleasant to Patty's feelings.

She laid a trembling hand on the banister ; she drew a long, quivering sigh. Then she recovered herself. Sir Ralph should not leave the house without speaking to her, Patty decided, if she remained on the landing of the staircase all day. Therefore Patty remained. The landlady passed her, and made some remark about the weather, which Patty answered, but did not stir. A quarter of an hour later the landlady came down from the upper part of the house and looked surprised when she found Miss May still stationary. But Patty was not a young woman to allow landladies, or any other ladies, to move her from her purpose. She was waiting to waylay Sir Ralph, and wait she did.

In the meantime, in the back sitting-room, Sir Ralph was telling Laura Ingram his news. She had been sitting writing when he was ushered in, and she rose with a smile and a charming blush to welcome him.

They shook hands, and then Sir Ralph made a sort of apology for calling.

‘I hope you will forgive me for intruding on you without any invitation,’ he said, ‘but I have something to tell you.’

‘Yes?’ said Laura, inquiringly, looking with her dark eyes at his face.

‘So I could not resist coming. Well, your story is accepted.’

‘No! Not really?’ cried Laura, eagerly, and her face flushed.

‘Yes, really,’ he answered. I saw Mr Ross to-day, and he had read it, and spoke highly of it—and here,’ continued Sir Ralph, drawing a five-pound note from his pocket, and placing it in Laura’s hand, ‘are your first earnings.’

Laura’s face flushed more deeply still, and her bosom heaved.

‘I can scarcely believe it,’ she said; ‘it cannot be true?’

‘Nevertheless it is,’ smiled Sir Ralph, ‘and I have great pleasure in being the bearer to you of good news.’

‘It is good news.’

‘Besides, Ross spoke of it so favourably. It is very little money, certainly.’

‘It’s a great deal to me.’

And for a moment Laura’s eyes grew

a little dim with unshed tears. Then she turned her head away to hide this, and went to the window, and stood there looking out on the smoky walls. She felt so grateful; and a strange emotion stirred in her heart. It was so good of Sir Ralph, she was thinking, so good to take all this trouble, and also to come and tell her.

‘I—I have not thanked you,’ she presently said, with faltering tongue, ‘but—I am very grateful.’

‘It has been a pleasure to me to do anything for you, though this was such a little thing,’ answered Sir Ralph.

‘And to pay so promptly,’ continued Laura. ‘I do not understand it.’

‘Oh, I admit I asked Ross for the

money,' laughed Sir Ralph; 'it's no good being too modest, and in two months it will be published. By-the-by, will you use your own name, or a *nom de plume*?'

'I don't know; what do you think?'

Sir Ralph hesitated; he was of that order of mankind who rather shrink from any publicity for women; at least women for whom they have any regard. It would make others talk of her, and know her. These were the thoughts which at this moment flashed through his mind,

'If you choose a *nom de plume* you must choose a pretty one,' he said.

'Or a manly one?' smiled Laura.

'But you are not manly, and I don't think your writings will be manly.'

'Yet,' said Laura, still smiling, 'at

Suffold, the country town I came from, I was, I believe, called strong-minded.'

'A terrible sobriquet!'

'Rather a good one, I think, though, for a poor woman who has to make her way alone in the world.'

'You may not always be alone,' said Sir Ralph, without looking at her.

'I expect to be so, therefore I must cultivate the strong-mindedness. But about my *nom de plume*, how would J. Hill do? The J. would stand either for a man or a woman, you know, and the Hill denotes stability,' and Laura laughed.

Sir Ralph also laughed.

'It's not bad,' he said. 'Well, I hope J. Hill will be a great success.'

'If he or she is,' answered Laura, speaking gaily, though with a little

tremor in her voice, 'I shall owe it all to you.'

'No author owes all, or indeed much, to anyone. They stand or fall on their own merits.'

After this Sir Ralph began to talk about books and book makers, and Laura sat interested and absorbed. Half an hour passed, three-quarters, and impatient Patty, on the landing of the staircase, kept stamping with rage. There was a frightful draught blowing on her head, and this added to the exasperation of her heart. But still she remained at her post. Then, as it was almost growing dark, she heard the handle of the door of the back sitting-room turn, and in a moment Patty hurried downstairs, and met Sir Ralph just as he emerged from Laura's room.

‘Sir Ralph!’ she cried, breathlessly, with outstretched hand.

‘Miss May!’ said Sir Ralph, utterly astonished, and by no means delighted.

‘Yes,’ answered Patty, volubly, ‘we have come to live in town, you know, since poor aunt’s death. We are staying in this house; isn’t it funny we should meet?’ And Patty smiled her most charming smile.

‘I heard poor Mrs Phillips was dead; I was very sorry to hear it.’

‘Yes; but you must come up to our room and hear all the news.’

‘I am afraid not this afternoon,’ said Sir Ralph, drawing out his watch.

‘Oh! but you must, you must!’ cried Patty, positively. ‘What, do you think I am going to lose sight

of such an old friend without a word. Come up, now,' and Patty laid her pretty, slender hand persuasively on his arm.

Sir Ralph laughed and yielded; and Patty led him in triumph up to the drawing-room, where he also found Ella May, who had been sitting in some anxiety, awaiting the result of Patty's long watch.

'Ella, here is Sir Ralph,' said Patty; 'isn't it strange I met him at the foot of the staircase?'

'Very strange!' said Ella, rising and shaking hands with Sir Ralph.

'Now, please sit down,' continued Patty, addressing him, 'I've got such lots to tell you. But first of all tell me something. Do you know anyone staying in the house?'

‘Yes, I have an acquaintance who is staying here,’ replied Sir Ralph.

‘There is a lady staying here, a Miss Ingram, a dark girl, is she your friend?’ inquired Patty.

‘I know a Miss Ingram,’ answered Sir Ralph, with a certain reserve in his tone, which Patty’s sharp ears were quick to catch.

‘Oh! how nice! You must introduce us to her if she is a friend of yours, and living in the house,’ said Patty.

‘I have only a slight acquaintance with her—I scarcely should like,’ hesitated Sir Ralph.

‘Oh! Acquaintances are easily made and dropped in London I am told,’ answered Patty, ‘not like old friends;’ and Patty’s white eyelids fell over her

bright eyes. 'I'm so awfully glad to see you again, Sir Ralph. Ella, go and tell them to bring some tea, and then we must have our gossip.'

Patty passed close to where Sir Ralph was sitting as she said this, and went to stir the fire, moving her fine form as she did so with a sort of seductive grace which was natural to her. Then she looked round at Sir Ralph.

'It's like the old days and the old home, isn't it?' she said.

'You mean at Laytonside?' asked Sir Ralph, who had been admiring Patty's figure and well-made dress.

'Yes, at the drowsy, sleepy old vicarage; and yet I had some happy days there,' and Patty sighed ever so softly.

‘Were you sorry to leave it?’ said Sir Ralph.

‘I need not have left it, sir!’ answered Patty, coquettishly. ‘The vicar, good man, offered to take me, and keep me with the rest of the goods and chattels.’

‘And you would not?’ laughed Sir Ralph.

‘No, I would not,’ and again Patty’s white eyelids fell. ‘Mr Snowe is, I believe, a very kind and worthy man—but one can’t help one’s feelings.’

Sir Ralph moved rather uneasily.

‘Of course not,’ he said, briefly.

‘And unless you—care for a person,’ continued Patty, still with her eyes fixed on the carpet, ‘what good is it—it is better to be alone.’

‘Certainly.’

‘I was sorry to disappoint him, but—it was not to be.’

‘Not written in the book of fate, eh?’ said Sir Ralph, somewhat feebly.

‘No, not written in the book of fate. What I would give to peep into it!’

‘It might not make you any happier.’

‘Still, I should like to know,’ continued Patty, beginning to walk up and down the room, as if the conversation excited her; ‘to look for a moment at the future years—would you not?’ and she suddenly stopped before Sir Ralph and looked with her bright eyes in his face.

‘Yes, I think I would,’ he answered, and as he spoke he was not thinking of the yellow-haired girl standing before him.

Yet Patty May was looking very pretty this afternoon, and Sir Ralph was quite ready to admit it. She pleased his eyes but not his heart. Her form, her colouring, her grace, made her attractive, yet she lacked something. A subtle something which shone in Laura Ingram's dark eyes, and told of a truer, nobler soul; and this thought passed through the young man's mind as he looked on Patty's fair eager face.

'But men are so different to us; they can make their fate,' continued Patty.

'Not always.'

'They can strive for it at all events; but we have to sit and wait.'

Sir Ralph smiled a little grimly. Patty was by no means a young woman to 'sit and wait,' he knew from experience. A mental vision rose

before him at this moment; a vision of Patty May and himself on a moonlit night standing together in a country lane. He had dined at the vicarage, and Patty, with her golden hair uncovered, had lured him first into the garden, and then beyond. He was young, and as the girl looked up in his face with her shining eyes he had been strongly tempted to kiss her. Some subtle instinct told Patty this, and she bent her head nearer his shoulder, and in a foolish mood Sir Ralph did kiss her, but the next moment apologised.

‘Forgive me,’ he said; ‘it was wrong of me to do that.’

‘It might not be,’ half whispered Patty, and these words recalled Sir Ralph completely to his senses.

‘It is late, we had better go in,’ he said, and Patty, disgusted with his coldness, was compelled to return to the house.

The recollection of this little scene acted as a warning to Sir Ralph ever afterwards. He knew she was trying to lead him on to speak words that he had no intention of saying. And he knew this now as Patty stood before him in her London lodging. He therefore rose, and held out his hand to say good-bye.

‘I really must go,’ he said; ‘I have an appointment this afternoon which I must keep. I have stayed too long.’

‘Oh, do not go yet, when we have not met for so long,’ urged Patty. ‘Ella will be here in a moment or two.’

‘I really cannot stay to-day.’

‘When will you come again, then?
And about your friend downstairs, I
shall call on her, as any friend of yours
I am sure will be so nice.’

‘But Miss Ingram is very quiet; she
is a painter and a writer.’

‘How delightful! I shall be charmed
to know her; I will call to-morrow.’

‘But—’

‘Indeed you must introduce no “buts,”
Sir Ralph, it will be so pleasant to
have her near us, and as we are all
girls we will be quite companions.’

Sir Ralph could not very well say
anything more, but as he went down
the staircase he thought he might as
well give Miss Ingram notice of Miss
Patty May’s intentions regarding her.

He therefore paused a moment at

Laura's door, and as he did so the unmistakable sound of a low sob fell on his ears. It alarmed Sir Ralph; it struck him that Laura might be ill, and require some assistance, so he rapped. There was no answer for a moment, and he rapped again.

Then Laura, in a very broken voice, said 'Come in.'

Upon which Sir Ralph entered, and as he did so Laura turned her head hastily round, and he saw by the firelight that she had been crying. She was sitting at the table, with her back to the door, and an open letter was lying before her, which, as she recognised Sir Ralph, she quickly caught in her hand, and rose in apparent agitation.

'I fear I am intruding, but—are you

not well, Miss Ingram?' said Sir Ralph, nervously.

'Oh, yes! But—but I was reading an old letter,' faltered Laura, also nervously; and as she spoke she crossed the room and went to an open escritoire standing in one corner of the room, and placed the letter in it, and then locked it, leaving Sir Ralph standing, feeling far from happy.

CHAPTER V.

MAKING ACQUAINTANCE.

LAURA, however, quickly recovered her self-possession, and, having locked the escritoire, turned round with a faint endeavour at a smile.

‘It is foolish to look at things that worry you,’ she said; ‘but this letter was left by my poor father.’

Sir Ralph’s clouded brow instantly cleared.

‘Ah, by your father?’ he said, in a relieved tone. ‘I am so vexed I in-

truded on you—and about such nonsense, too.'

'And what is the nonsense?' asked Laura. 'But will you not sit down?'

There was a good fire burning in the grate, and at either side of the hearthrug two basket - chairs stood empty. Sir Ralph looked at one of these, and laid his hand on the back of it.

'May I sit here for a few minutes?' he asked.

'Yes, do,' and then Laura sat down opposite to him.

'I'm afraid what I have got to say will be rather a nuisance to you,' continued Sir Ralph, stretching out his long legs before the ruddy glow of the fire, with a sense of inward satisfaction; 'but there are two girls in

this house I know, that I have known for some years, and as I left you I encountered one of them in the hall.'

'I heard that there were two young ladies here.'

'Yes, the two Mays; they are the nieces of my old tutor, Mr Phillips, who was vicar of Laytonside, and these girls are Anglo-Indians, and lived with their aunt. I saw them sometimes, and Miss Patty is rather a gushing young person, and, when she heard I knew you, she insisted that she would call on you and make your acquaintance; so I came to warn you.' And Sir Ralph laughed.

'It is very kind,' said Laura, with a faint uneasiness in her tone; but I fear I have no time to make new acquaintances.'

‘Then just tell the maid to say you are not at home.’

‘That would be rather uncourteous, would it not?’

‘She had no right to propose such a thing; but Miss Patty is by no means shy.’

‘She may not really come.’

‘Perhaps not, but I thought I would tell you. Their uncle was a nice old man; my place, you know, is not far from Laytonside, and when I was a lad I used to ride to the vicarage every day.’

‘Then you have known these young ladies a long time.’

‘Oh, not so long as that—about three years, I think. Their father was a colonel out in India, and he died, and that is how they

came to live with their aunt, Mrs Phillips.'

'And are they pretty girls?'

'They are good-looking, I think.

'And you are not sure?' smiled Laura.

'Not quite sure,' answered Sir Ralph, also smiling. 'I used to think Patty rather pretty, but one's ideas change, I think.'

'Well, I shall tell you what I think when I see her.'

'She's a showy sort of girl, with golden hair; but I hope they won't bore you.'

'Perhaps she will do for a model, a study?' said Laura, still smiling.

'Do you mean for literature or art?'

'Oh, the study of a head; the golden hair you talk of is always artistic.'

‘Miss Patty’s is very artistic, I should say,’ said Sir Ralph, with a somewhat grim little laugh. Then he added, ‘But I suppose I should go now, only it’s so comfortable here I do not feel inclined to move.’

‘There is no hurry.’

‘Am I not keeping you from your work?’

‘No, it’s too dark to work. Would you like some tea?’

‘I should most awfully.’

Laura put out her hand and rang the bell, and Sir Ralph breathed a sigh of inward satisfaction. He was not at all fond of tea, but it gave him an excuse to stay a quarter of an hour or so longer with Laura, and he would have drunk many cups of tea for this pleasure.

So the tea was brought in, and Laura poured it out, and Sir Ralph sat watching her by the flickering fire-light. Laura was graceful, but she had none of the sensuous grace that distinguished Patty May. She moved with a certain dignity of bearing, and made no effort, and indeed never thought of attracting admiration. She was simple and natural alike in her words and manner, and all this Sir Ralph had been quick to perceive.

‘What a difference there is between them,’ he was thinking; comparing in his mental vision the two girls he knew under the same roof; ‘the one upstairs frightens me, but with Miss Ingram I feel at home.’

So much at home, indeed, did he feel, that he sat talking to Laura what

he knew was an unreasonable time. Then suddenly he sprang up.

‘I am ashamed of myself,’ he said. ‘Here I’ve been sitting wasting your time, and, I dare say, you have been wishing me away a thousand times.’

‘No, I have not,’ answered Laura pleasantly. ‘I have enjoyed your conversation.’

‘Then I may come again?’ asked Sir Ralph, holding out his hand.

‘Yes,’ answered Laura, as she took it.

So they parted, and Sir Ralph went out into the now lighted streets with a new sense of elation and pleasure in his heart. Laura was such a charming companion, he told himself; so well-read, so thoughtful. Not always thinking of her handsome face, though

it was a hundred times handsomer than Patty May's. He was sorry Patty was in the same house, but what did it matter? Patty had nothing particular to tell against him.

‘And she's not one to listen to idle gossip or insinuations,’ thought Sir Ralph. ‘She's a dear girl. It makes a man feel better to have known her.’

At this moment Miss Patty May was receiving what to her was almost a shock. The maid of the house, whose name was Brice, and who was of a talkative and lively disposition, was engaged in removing the afternoon tea which had been ordered for Sir Ralph, but which he had declined to partake of. And as she was placing the cups on the tray, she remarked casually,—

‘The gentleman who called here had

tea with Miss Ingram downstairs, miss.'

'What?' said Patty, looking quickly up, who was leaning back in an easy chair by the fire, with a novel lying on her lap. 'Not Sir Ralph?'

'Yes, miss, he was called Sir Ralph something, but I have forgot the rest; but he called on Miss Ingram first this afternoon, then on you, and after he left you he went again to Miss Ingram's room, and they had tea together; he's just gone.'

A pang shot through Patty's vain heart; an absolute pang of pain. He had declined to stay and have tea with her, and yet he had gone to this other girl!

'Are you sure?' she said; 'Sir Ralph Woodland is an old friend of ours.'

‘Yes, miss, I am quite sure, for I took in the tray. They were sitting together by the fire when I went in.’

Patty asked no more questions ; she turned almost faint. She had set her heart on marrying Sir Ralph Woodland, and if this other girl had really come between she felt it was more than she could bear. She looked at Ella, who was lying on a couch, and Ella gave an answering glance. Then, when Brice and her tea-tray were gone, she rose from her seat, and said hastily,—

‘What do you think of that, Ella?’

‘It looked rather queer,’ answered Ella.

‘What can she be to him?’ went on Patty excitedly. ‘She’s an artist,’

he said, 'and a writer. Fancy Ralph Woodland carrying on a flirtation with a blue stocking! What shall we do, I must stop it somehow?'

'It may not be a flirtation,' suggested Ella.

'It may not, but he would not stay to have tea here, and he went back you see to her! I think,' and Patty stamped one of her pretty feet vehemently on the floor, 'I could kill her if she takes him away from me!'

'Don't be silly, Patty.'

'That's what I feel, I can tell you. I am certain he cared for me at one time; cared for me awfully, and to think that anyone should come between us would just drive me mad. We must get to know her at once, Ella, and see what sort of girl she is.

I wonder if she is as good-looking as I am ?’

She went up to the mirror in the overmantel as she spoke, and stood there looking at her pretty face. It was a fair image, and Patty’s eyes did not recognise nor see its faults. She believed in her own beauty, and was proud of it ; and she felt as she gazed at herself that she would win Sir Ralph still.

‘She shall not cut me out,’ she said at length, turning away. ‘Let us call on her to-morrow, Ella ; I told Ralph Woodland we would call.’

‘Do you think you would until you know more about her ?’ suggested Ella.

‘I do not care who she is, or what

she is, as long as I stop her affair with Sir Ralph,' answered Patty, recklessly. 'Yes, we must go, Ella, and I'll try to get out from her how she got to know him, and how long she has known him, and all about it.'

Accordingly the next afternoon Patty and Ella May, having dressed themselves in their most becoming costumes, and having learnt from the maid Brice that Miss Ingram was at home, proceeded downstairs, and told Brice to rap at the door of Miss Ingram's room, and take in their cards.

This Brice did, and Patty then heard a sweet-toned voice say, 'Show the young ladies in, Brice,' which the maid at once proceeded to do.

Then Patty and Ella entered, and

Laura Ingram rose to receive them, and bowed gravely.

‘Excuse us for coming,’ said Patty, advancing smilingly; ‘but a very great and a very old friend of ours told us all about you, and I think you know him also—Sir Ralph Woodland?’

‘Yes, I know Sir Ralph Woodland,’ answered Laura, looking somewhat curiously at the two pretty girls before her.

And the two pretty girls—one of them, at least, was looking most critically at her. And Patty was too shrewd, too clever, not to admit that the slender, black-robed woman before her, with her handsome face and noble bearing, was a dangerous rival. Patty recognised this at once, but she made no sign of any such feeling. She looked in the

most friendly manner at Laura ; she smiled her sweetest smiles.

‘Sir Ralph told us you are a writer and a painter,’ she said, ‘and I was so interested. It must be charming to be clever, and as we are in the same house, and all girls, we took the liberty of calling.’

‘I am very pleased to see you,’ answered Laura courteously. ‘Where will you sit?’

Patty having placed herself in a graceful attitude on a chair, commenced again to talk of Sir Ralph Woodland.

‘It was so odd,’ she said, ‘but I met Sir Ralph yesterday afternoon just coming out of your room. He is a very old friend, indeed, of ours,’ and here Patty cast down her eyes. ‘He was a pupil of my poor uncle’s, you

know, the vicar of Laytonside, when he was a youth. Of course we were children then. Have you known him long?’

‘Not very long,’ answered Laura, with a half-smile. She was beginning to perceive the cause of Miss Patty May’s visit from the drift of her conversation.

‘Do tell me what you write?’ went on the voluble Patty. ‘Are they love stories?’

‘There must be some love in all stories, you know,’ replied Laura, with a little laugh.

‘Can you lend me one; I am dying to read it?’

‘I am sorry I cannot, as I have had none published yet, but I have had one accepted, and then I shall be glad to lend it to you.

‘Oh, how delightful! Thank you so much. And Sir Ralph said you paint too; is this one of yours?’

And Patty rose, and went up to an easel in the corner of the room, on which there was an unfinished study of a girl’s head.

‘Yes,’ said Laura, following her, and looking at her work; ‘but, as you see, this is in a very crude state.’

‘Still, I see, it will be lovely when it is done. How clever you are! Ah, I wish I was clever.’

Patty rattled on in this fashion for at least half an hour longer, Ella chiming in occasionally, and then the two rose to go, Patty warmly pressing Laura to return their visit early. Then, as the door closed behind the sisters, they looked at each other significantly,

and Patty's expression was not a very happy one, and as soon as they reached their own room, she said quickly,—

‘What do you think of her, Ella?’

‘She is good-looking, almost handsome for a dark girl,’ replied Ella.

‘Yes,’ admitted Patty unwillingly. ‘But she wants something—I don’t think that Ralph Woodland can really admire her.’

‘She did not say much about him.’

‘Oh! I think nothing of that; that might be just slyness, and she looks one of those sly creatures to keep everything to themselves. Of course, she’ll try to make up to him—a girl working for her bread, I suppose, and living in a back room. But we’ll see.’

And Patty nodded her golden head, and again went to the mirror, and

arranged her pretty bonnet more to her satisfaction before going out into the streets.

The evening did not pass, however, before Laura Ingram was again reminded of her neighbours.

This time the communication came in the form of a little note from Patty May, and was as follows:—

‘DEAR MISS INGRAM, — Would you very kindly (if you have it) give me Sir Ralph Woodland’s address in town? Was it not stupid of us, but though he left his card yesterday, we have contrived to mislay it, and I wish to ask him to come and have tea with us to-morrow, and I hope you will come also. Do come.—Yours sincerely,

‘PATRICA MAY.’

Laura replied by giving Sir Ralph's address at his club, and also accepted the invitation to tea. She felt a little curious about these two girls, and their evident interest in Sir Ralph, excited hers.

‘She is handsome—the eldest one,’ she thought; ‘at least she has a sort of captivation about her. I wonder if he admires her.’

And Laura sighed.

CHAPTER VI.

AFTERNOON TEA.

SIR RALPH received Patty May's invitation the next morning, and she had duly baited it.

'Your friend downstairs,' she wrote, 'is coming to have tea with us to-morrow, so will you come also? Do come;' and so on.

Sir Ralph certainly would not have gone unless his 'friend downstairs' had been going, but he could not resist the pleasure of seeing Laura Ingram again

so soon. He therefore sent a telegram to accept Patty's invitation, and at five o'clock in the afternoon was ringing at the street door of the house in Maddox Street.

He asked for Miss Ingram, but was told by Brice that she was 'having tea with the two other ladies in the drawing-room. But they expect you, sir,' added the maid, smiling.

Sir Ralph accordingly proceeded upstairs, and was received with effusion and a great show of intimacy by Patty May. It annoyed him, the references she constantly made to their former friendship.

'Ah, don't you remember that day we went so-and-so, Sir Ralph?'

It was always, 'Don't you remember this or the other?' and Sir Ralph did

not like all this before Laura Ingram. Patty was also dressed to perfection, and looked really very handsome, and certainly did her best to fascinate her guest, but Sir Ralph was not responsive. He sat and looked at the three girls, and the one that made no effort to attract his admiration attracted him most. Laura did not say very much, for Patty seemed determined to let no one speak but herself. She wished to show Sir Ralph how much more brilliant she was than the quiet, dark-eyed girl dressed in her black gown, whom she wished to eclipse. Poor Patty! Sir Ralph was soon tired of her chatter, and longing to have a quiet conversation with Laura. He addressed Laura once or twice, and she answered

sensibly and to the point, but Patty speedily interrupted them.

‘And where did you two first meet?’ she said presently, and a quick blush rose to Laura’s oval cheeks as she listened to the question.

‘We met at the National Gallery,’ she replied, with a slight reserve in her tone.

‘At the National Gallery!’ echoed Patty. ‘Then were you introduced to each other?’

‘Of course we were,’ said Sir Ralph sharply.

‘But what a funny place to meet; I have never been there; I should like to go; will you take us some day, Sir Ralph?’ went on Patty.

‘Yes, if you wish it,’ replied Sir Ralph coldly.

‘Oh, I do wish it; I love pictures; do let us fix a day?’

‘If you go on a students’ day you will see a picture by Miss Ingram very well worth looking at’ said Sir Ralph.

‘Then let us go on a students’ day by all means. What day shall we fix? I shall be delighted to go, won’t we, Ella?’ remarked Patty, with affected enthusiasm.

‘You should not say that, Sir Ralph,’ smiled Laura Ingram, ‘or Miss May will be disappointed with my poor attempt.’

‘Not if she knows how to judge good work,’ said Sir Ralph, also smiling, and his dark face softened wonderfully as he looked at Laura.

‘Well, after that pretty speech, I

think I must go,' said Laura, rising, and holding out her hand to Patty, who took it. 'Good-bye, Miss May; good-bye, Sir Ralph,' and she next offered her hand to Sir Ralph Woodland, who, however, rose without taking it in his.

'I will see you safely downstairs if you will allow me,' he said. 'Good-bye, Miss May.'

'What! you are surely not going?' cried Patty, greatly annoyed.

'Yes, thank you; good-bye, Miss Ella.'

'But about going to the National Gallery?' said Patty, trying to detain him. But Laura was already at the door of the room, and Sir Ralph hurried after her.

'If you will fix with Miss Ingram

any day I will meet you there,' answered Sir Ralph, glancing round, and the next moment he closed the door, and followed Laura downstairs, leaving Patty intensely chagrined.

'Did you ever see anything so rude, so ungentlemanly!' she cried, 'going after that girl like that? I don't know what to think; yes, I do, I don't believe she's respectable!'

'He behaved very oddly, certainly; I think he must admire her,' answered Ella.

'Admire her!' and Patty stamped her little foot on the floor. 'Men don't really admire women of that sort. They run after them, and let them make fools of them, but admire, indeed!'

Patty in truth was in a towering rage, and could not conceal it. Her

cheeks flushed, her eyes flashed, and then filled with tears, and she began walking up and down the room with irregular footsteps.

‘We should never have got to know her,’ she said presently.

‘Well, we don’t know anything against her really,’ suggested Ella.

‘Oh! don’t we. Do you suppose a stiff and starched man like Ralph Woodland would run after her as he did unless she had him in her toils? Do you think it’s proper him going down and sitting all alone with her in that back room of hers? It’s disgusting, simply disgusting, and the next time I see him I’ll give him a piece of my mind.’

‘That would be very silly. You might make him think of marrying

her, if you were to attack her like that.'

'Marry her!' screamed Patty. 'Do you think he'd marry a girl like that? A beggar like that! I know no man prouder than Ralph Woodland. She's all very well to amuse himself with, to make a fool of for a time, but marry her, not he!'

In the meanwhile the two whose conduct had created all this commotion were standing quietly together by the fire in Laura's room.

'She is certainly pretty,' Laura was saying, speaking of Patty May.

'Yes, in a way,' answered Sir Ralph; 'but I don't admire her style particularly.'

'I am afraid she did not like you leaving with me.'

‘I don’t care whether she liked it or not; I liked it, and I should not have gone unless I had expected to meet you there.’

Laura sighed ever so softly, and her head drooped a little lower, but she did not speak.

‘I want you to do me a favour, Miss Ingram,’ said Sir Ralph, after a little pause.

‘Yes,’ answered Laura, looking up.

‘Will you come with me to the Lyceum some night? You told me you had never seen Irving, and I should like you to see him.’

Laura hesitated.

‘It is very good of you,’ she said; ‘but—’

‘Why should you not go? I wish

you would let me take you about a little to different places.'

'What would the Misses May say? what would Mrs Grundy say?' answered Laura, with a somewhat uneasy little laugh.

'I don't care either what the Misses May say, or Mrs Grundy! I want you to have a little amusement and pleasure.'

'And my work?'

'You will work all the better.'

Laura gently shook her head,

'No, I think not,' she said; 'I want to try to live for my work, to live in it, and forget myself entirely.'

'That is folly; forgive my saying so; but indeed it is. You have your life to live; your work may be part of it, but never the chief part.'

‘I wish to feel that it is so.’

‘But why? You are young, and, don’t be angry, you are handsome, and naturally life has much to offer you.’

Again Laura slightly shook her head.

‘Life is a mystery to me,’ she said.

‘It is to us all more or less, but I think we should try to make the best of it.’

‘It is so difficult always,’ went on Laura. ‘It seems to me there is always a struggle between what we want to do and what we ought to do. And it is so tangled; the sins and sorrows of others burden those who have had no part in them.’

‘The wisest plan is not to let them do so. Our own sins and sorrows are enough, and too much. But we have

drifted away from the point. Will you go somewhere with me to-morrow?’

‘It would be a pleasure to me to do so,’ said Laura, raising her dark eyes and looking in Sir Ralph’s face steadily and sadly, ‘but I think I had better not.’

‘If it will be a pleasure to you I will listen to no “buts,”’ answered Sir Ralph brightly. ‘I will call for you at four, or say three o’clock, and we can go where you like, and then we must fix about the theatre.’

‘You will make me quite idle.’

‘Is that a hint that I have stayed long enough just now? Let me stay five minutes more, Miss Ingram, and then I really will go.’

‘I never give hints,’ answered Laura, smiling.

‘I’m glad of that. If you are tired of me, tell me plainly out that you are.’

‘But that would not be polite,’ said Laura, still smiling.

‘I don’t care about you being polite to me, I want you just to say what you think.’

‘No one does that, Sir Ralph.’

‘I know; not among people that do not understand each other; but somehow or other I think that we do. At least I know that I like talking to you better than to anyone else, and you seem able to talk to me, though I am not as a rule very easy to get on with, they say.’

‘I find it very easy to talk to you.’

‘I’m glad of that. Well, then, to

morrow at three o'clock I will call for you, and now good-bye.'

He pressed her hand as he parted with her, and Laura sighed deeply after he was gone.

'I suppose I should not have promised to go with him,' she was thinking; 'but his will is stronger than mine, I think, and after all it can do me no harm to be friends with him—and I like him so much.'

Then she smiled a little to herself, thinking of the two girls upstairs, and their evident annoyance because he had left the room with her. 'He had better not have done so, perhaps,' she reflected, and yet she was pleased that he had. And something of the same feeling rose in her heart the next day when it neared three o'clock. She had

looked more than once at her watch, and when just at the hour she heard the house door bell ring she listened anxiously. A minute or two later Sir Ralph was ushered into her room, and, as she rose to receive him, she saw he was carrying a magnificent bouquet.

‘Will you accept a posy I have brought for you?’ he said, as he placed it in her hand.

Laura’s face flushed with pleasure, and her heart beat fast.

‘How lovely they are! How beautiful,’ she said; ‘but you should not have brought them.’

‘Why not? I have been down to Covent Garden to get them for you, as I fancied somehow that you would like flowers.’

‘Indeed, I do. I love them, and it

was so kind of you to think of it, yet—'

'Yet what?'

'I think I should scold you for bringing them.'

'If they give you any pleasure, please don't scold me. And now are you ready to go out?'

'I have just my hat to put on; but first I must ring for a vase or something for my beautiful flowers in; thank you for them so much.'

Presently the maid brought in a vase, and Sir Ralph stood by as Laura placed the flowers in it, and he noticed that her hands trembled a little as she did so. Then she ran upstairs to put on her hat, and on the landing she encountered Patty May, who turned her head away with a sudden jerk when she saw her.

Laura naturally felt surprised. Miss May had sought her acquaintance, and to treat her in this uncourteous fashion, to say the least, was very strange. But she took no notice, and passed into her own room to prepare herself for going out.

The truth was that Patty May, who had been nursing her wrath ever since Sir Ralph had left the drawing-room with Laura on the previous day, had also heard the door bell ring, and, after rushing to the window, she had seen Sir Ralph alight from a hansom, carrying a large bouquet in his hand.

For a moment or two Patty's heart beat fast, and her cheeks flushed. There had been days when Sir Ralph had brought her flowers, and it flashed through Patty's mind that these might be for her. But no; he entered the

house, but he did not come upstairs. He had brought them for that girl, and Patty's anger was almost too great for words.

She panted, she grew pale, and then she went out on the landing to try if she could hear or see anything. She saw the maid carry in the vase for the flowers, and then Laura Ingram came running upstairs, and Patty in her rage purposely cut her.

'It's too disgusting,' she told Ella a minute or two later. And she thought it more disgusting still when, by-and-by, she saw Laura leave the house with Sir Ralph, and the two walk down the street together side by side.

Patty indeed lost all control over herself with rage. She raved, she cried, and declared Sir Ralph had treated her

disgracefully, though in truth he had done nothing of the sort. Sir Ralph in the meantime was feeling exceedingly happy, and had utterly forgotten the very existence of Miss Patty May.

He was with Laura, and Laura had become to him the one woman he cared for in the world. He took her to a picture gallery in New Bond Street, and they spent the afternoon together, and there was a subtle joy in Laura's heart she did not care to analyse. That secret sympathy which we cannot create, that silent knowledge of an unseen bond which we cannot ignore, had arisen between these two, and for the time at least made the world seem bright to them both.

There was not many people in the gallery, and they sat down and talked

quietly enough, but quiet words can be full of meaning. Laura forgot in these sweet moments the haunting shadow that hung over her life. She did not ask herself does he love me, but she felt it, and the knowledge brought joy to her soul.

At last, unwillingly, she rose to go, and, turning to Sir Ralph, she said, with a smile,—

‘It is time my holiday was over.’

‘Your first holiday,’ he answered pleasantly, also rising; ‘but I hope you mean to have many.’

‘No, I must not have many.’

‘Yes, you must.’

‘I am afraid you are a wilful man, Sir Ralph.’

‘Upon this point, yes.’

Laura laughed softly. Women as a

rule by no means dislike to be treated in this lordly fashion. She liked to be told she must do what this strong, resolute-faced man bade her. But she said nothing; they walked back to Laura's room together, and never saw or thought of looking up to see the white-faced, red-eyed woman who was sitting at the drawing-room window watching for their return.

‘Will you come in and have some tea?’ said Laura, when they reached the door of the house, and Sir Ralph was only too glad to accept the invitation.

He went in with her, and noticed as he passed her table that a letter directed to her lay there; a letter in a man's handwriting. Laura also noticed this, and lifted it up, and re-

cognised that Mr George Gifford, of Suffolk, was her correspondent. A faint colour passed over her face as she saw this, for she had not heard from George Gifford since her arrival in town.

But she quietly laid the letter down on the table without opening it, and glanced at Sir Ralph as she did so, who was somewhat moodily regarding it.

‘It is from my lawyer at Suffolk,’ said Laura, with momentarily instinct, and Sir Ralph’s expression at once changed.

‘Lawyers are often great bores, and very expensive bores too,’ he said.

‘Mine was very kind to me at the time of my poor father’s death,’ answered Laura, and then she changed

the conversation, and Sir Ralph drank manfully three cups of tea, so as to prolong the interview.

At last he rose to go.

‘May I call to-morrow afternoon for you?’ he said, as he held out his hand.

‘No, to-morrow afternoon I am going to be busy, I can go nowhere,’ answered Laura decidedly.

‘The next afternoon then; till then good-bye, and with a significant pressure of her hand he went away.

And all the next day he kept thinking of Laura; of Laura whom he meant to ask to be his wife, and to whom his heart yearned with strange deep tenderness.

Imagine with what dismay and shock then he received the following

letter by an early post on the morning of the day he again intended to call on Laura; the day he had said he would do so, when he parted with her. It was written in, to him, an unknown handwriting, and he read the words it contained with a fast-beating angry heart.

‘SIR,—This is written by a friend to warn you of the character of the person whom you visit in Maddox Street. Miss Laura Ingram is a woman of bad character, the writer of this knows too well, and a gentleman spent many hours alone with her yesterday in your absence. Be warned in time.

A VICTIM.’

CHAPTER VII.

A PROPOSAL.

It is almost impossible to describe the feelings with which Sir Ralph again and again read this shameful letter. He was a man with strong, though suppressed passions, and one of his first actions was to fling it indignantly on the floor.

‘It is a lie!’ he said aloud. ‘An utter lie!’

Then he began to pace the room

with knitted brow, remembering his first acquaintance with Laura; certainly she had not sought him, he told himself. Could there be anyone else? He lifted up the letter again and read the condemning words. A gentleman with her all yesterday afternoon? Yesterday afternoon, when he had offered to call and take her out, and she had said she would be too busy to go. Could there be any truth in this? But no, no! He was too loyal to believe anything absolutely against the lofty-mannered, high-minded girl who now rose before his mental vision, sitting by his side in the picture gallery, with her dark eyes raised to his, and full of thought.

Some enemy has done it, some jealous woman, reflected Sir Ralph, and in a

moment the memory of Patty May flashed across his mind.

‘Yet could she be so base, so shameful, as to endeavour to destroy a woman’s character like this?’ he asked himself. He did not think highly of Patty May, but this was too low. It could not be Patty, and finally Sir Ralph determined to go to Maddox Street and ask Miss Ingram herself who was likely to try to injure her, as the writer of this letter had certainly intended to do.

Accordingly, early in the afternoon, Sir Ralph was ushered into Laura’s room by the waiting maid, and Laura rose with a pleased smile to receive him. But Sir Ralph’s manner was uncertain and absent, and more than once Laura glanced at him, wondering

what had happened to him. At last Sir Ralph blurted out the somewhat startling words,—

‘Miss Ingram, I want to ask you something—is there anyone who has a grudge against you? Have you any enemy?’

‘An enemy!’ repeated Laura, in great surprise. ‘No, not that I know of certainly.’

‘Yet you must have.’

‘Why do you say so, what reason have you?’ asked Laura.

‘I have received a letter; a disgraceful letter—’

‘About me? Impossible! I not only have no enemies in town, but I know no one?’

‘Yet this letter had been posted in town.’

‘What is it about? Will you let me see it?’

‘I cannot let you see it.’

‘But, I think, Sir Ralph, you ought. If anyone has been writing things that are not true about me, I ought to have the opportunity of contradicting them.’

Sir Ralph hesitated.

‘I did not believe a word of the letter,’ he said, ‘only I wanted to ask you if you knew of anyone who was likely to wish to do you harm.’

‘But what was the letter about?’

‘Oh, it was a nasty letter; it said you had a gentleman with you all yesterday afternoon for one thing.’

A slight flush spread over Laura’s clear face.

‘There is some truth in that at

least,' she said, after a moment's pause. 'My lawyer, Mr Gifford, was here yesterday afternoon, and remained for some time. It must have been someone in the house then that wrote it. Probably Miss May.'

'If I thought so—' began Sir Ralph angrily, and then he stopped.

'It is most likely; you know these young ladies called on me, and that I met you in their room? Well, after you left with me that day, I saw Miss May by accident on the staircase, and she determinately cut me! What absurd folly, is it not?'

'If I thought Patty May would do such a thing as write such a letter, I should go to her, and tell her very plainly what I thought. But I can scarcely believe it?'

‘But there is no one else could know Mr Gifford was here yesterday.’

‘And—have you known Mr Gifford long?’

‘For some years at least; he and his father are the principal solicitors in the country town where I lived when my poor father was alive. And Mr Gifford also knows very few, if any one, in town, so the letter could be written by none of his acquaintances—no, I believe it was Miss May.’

Sir Ralph was silent. He began walking slowly up and down the room, with a contracted brow and a disturbed heart. And Laura’s eyes followed him as he did so. Then suddenly an idea flashed through her brain which drove the blood from her cheeks. Could this letter be written by any-

one who knew, or guessed, of the dark tragedy that her father's last letter had disclosed? If so this might account for Sir Ralph's evident uneasiness and distress.

'I should rather see the letter,' she said a moment later, and she listened with parted lips for an answer.

'I cannot show it to you,' he replied abruptly.

'Is—is there any other name mentioned in it but mine?' went on Laura, with an earnest ring in her voice.

'None, except the gentleman, this Mr Gifford, who was with you yesterday, and his name even is not mentioned.'

'Then it is some piece of spiteful folly,' said Laura, a little scornfully, 'and I do not mean to think of it

any more. By-the-bye, I have got something to tell you ; Mr Valentine Ross, the editor, wishes me to call at his office about the story he accepted ; he wants some small alterations made in it.'

'Why can't he send it here?' answered Sir Ralph, rather sharply.

'I suppose he wishes to talk it over ; I have written to say I will call to-morrow.'

Sir Ralph felt unreasonably annoyed.

'He's rather a forward fellow Ross,' he said.

'Is he?' replied Laura, with a smile.

'Well, I do not think I shall be afraid of him.'

'Let me go with you?'

'No, I think you had better not. It is very good of you to offer to

do so, but you see I must get accustomed to going about among publishers' offices, if I ever really became a writer.'

'It must be very unpleasant for ladies, I think.'

'But what can poor ladies do who have to work for their bread?'

'I do not like to hear you say that—Laura,' and a sudden flush spread over Sir Ralph's dark face; 'Miss Ingram, I should say—I have something to say to you.'

'Yes,' answered Laura quietly.

'It is something that this confounded letter has only made me more anxious to say—you have some enemy, someone at least who wishes to do you an injury—give me a right to protect you; to make it im-

possible for anyone to say injurious things of you.'

'You are very good—' said Laura, with a quick blush, and downcast eyes.

'I mean will you be my wife? That will end all scandals, and then, if Miss Patty May did write this odious letter about you, she will find out her mistake.'

'There could be no scandals about me, Sir Ralph,' said Laura, raising her head a little proudly.

'But people invent things, and—and, Laura, if you will be my wife it will make me very happy.'

Again Laura's eyes fell, and a little quivering sigh escaped her lips.

'From the first time I saw you I liked you, you know,' continued Sir Ralph, and he took her hand, which

trembled in his clasp, 'and—and I will try to make you very happy.'

Then Laura lifted her dark eyes, and looked in his face.

'It—it cannot be, Sir Ralph,' she said, in a low tone.

'But why?' pleaded Sir Ralph. 'You do not dislike me, do you?'

'No, no, indeed! But there are reasons—a reason at least that must always prevent this.'

'You do not care for anyone else, do you?'

'I do not—I am very grateful for your kindness to me, most grateful—I wish to remain your friend, but—'

'If you don't care for anyone else I will try to win you yet, Laura—I must try, I have set my heart on this.'

‘I am very sorry, but it cannot be; indeed, indeed, Sir Ralph, it cannot be.’

‘I do not understand why?’

Laura turned away her head. She could not tell him ‘Why’; could not tell him the miserable suspicion which haunted her own mind. She began again after a little while to talk of the story with Mr Valentine Ross, and of another of which she had made a sketch. But Ralph Woodland did not seem interested. He was moody, and his mind completely preoccupied with the idea why Laura should refuse him. He had believed that she liked him, and that strange subtle instincts by which we gauge others’ feelings seemed to tell him still that this was true. Yet she

had spoken so positively ; she had given him no hope.

Presently he went away, and his face was very gloomy as he did so. Laura spoke to him kindly and gently, but she also was greatly disturbed. They shook hands, and thus they parted, and Sir Ralph went slowly down the street and turned into Regent Street with downcast eyes and a strange uneasy feeling in his heart.

‘There must be some strong reason, he told himself ; ‘a girl struggling for her daily bread to act thus.’

Then the hateful letter that he had received recurred to his mind. He was thinking of it when someone addressed him, and looking up he saw the smiling, pretty face of Patty May, with her yellow hair more elaborately arranged

even than usual beneath a very becoming little bonnet.

‘How are you, Sir Ralph?’ she said, holding out her well-gloved hand. ‘I am so glad to see you—I have something to tell you.’

‘Yes,’ answered Sir Ralph briefly.

‘May I turn with you a few steps, or will you turn with me?’ continued Patty in her airy fashion.

‘Just as you please,’ said Sir Ralph, who was not over pleased to have her company thus thrust on him.

‘Then I will turn with you. Such an extraordinary thing has happened, Sir Ralph, and I told Ella I was determined to tell you of it. You know that lady who is in the same house with us—Miss Ingram?’

‘Yes, what of her?’ answered Sir Ralph quickly.

‘Well, you know, we thought as she was a friend of yours it was sure to be all right, so we called on her, and, as you remember, we had her to tea to meet you?’

‘Yes.’

‘I did not quite like her manner, however,’ went on Patty, with a little shrug of her pretty shoulders, ‘but still that is nothing. But, just fancy, this morning I got a letter warning me against her, saying the most dreadful things.’

A flush rose on Sir Ralph’s face, and spread to his very brow.

‘A letter?’ he repeated, a little huskily. ‘What sort of a letter?’

‘Oh, a letter to tell us — well, that

she was no fit acquaintance for us — that she had done, and did the most dreadful things. That she was not a fit person to know, in fact—that she received gentlemen alone, in fact, and this letter was signed “A Victim,” and whoever wrote it seemed to know all about her.’

‘I don’t believe a word of it,’ answered Sir Ralph roughly.

‘Not that I got the letter?’ said Patty, opening her large blue eyes a little wider.

‘I daresay you may have got the letter, but I believe it’s all lies.’

‘Well, I only know that after I read the letter I asked the maid of the house about her, and she said a gentleman spent all yesterday afternoon with her, and, when Brice took in the tea, she

heard this man say something very sweet to her about bygone days.'

Sir Ralph made no answer ; he bit his lip under his heavy moustache, and knit his dark brows.

'It is very disagreeable to have made such an acquaintance,' continued Patty, with affected demureness. 'How was it you got to know her?'

'Can I see the letter?' asked Sir Ralph abruptly, without replying to Patty's question.

'Certainly, if you will go with me to the house. I have not got it with me.'

'All right, let us turn ; it is only just to Miss Ingram that such a letter should be seen to.'

'Yes, of course ; but do you know anything about her family or friends?'

Again Sir Ralph made no reply. He turned and strode quickly on, and Patty tripped daintily by his side, until they reached Maddox Street. They turned into it, and as they did they both saw a gentleman standing at the door of the house where Laura Ingram and Patty lived. He was ringing at the door bell, and just as they neared the house he was admitted.

‘Perhaps that is one of Miss Ingram’s admirers?’ said Patty, looking smilingly up in Sir Ralph’s gloomy face.

Then they in their turn rang the bell, and as the maid opened the door Patty addressed her.

‘Who was that gentlemen, Brice,’ she said, ‘who has just gone in?’

‘A gentleman for Miss Ingram, miss,’ replied the maid, with a smile;

‘the same that was here yesterday.’

Patty said nothing further ; she gave a significant glance at Sir Ralph, who had, of course, overheard the brief conversation, and then she led the way upstairs, and Sir Ralph followed her to the drawing-room.

‘I will show you the letter,’ said Patty, as soon as they reached it, ‘I fear there must be some truth in it.’

She then unlocked a little leather desk, and produced a letter in the same handwriting as the one Sir Ralph had received about Laura. He opened it, and read it with eager eyes. It was not worded exactly as his was, but it was to the same effect. Miss Laura Ingram was not a fit person to be an acquaintance of young ladies like the

Misses May. She was of bad character, and so on. And it was signed, as Patty had said, 'A Victim.'

'Isn't it most disagreeable,' remarked Patty, as Sir Ralph finished reading it, 'to be in the house with such a person?'

'It's an extraordinary thing! Whoever wrote it must have a motive, and she knows so few, or indeed no one in London,' said Sir Ralph.

'So she tells you.'

Patty said this with such marked emphasis that Sir Ralph looked at her keenly.

'Why should she seek to deceive me?' he said.

'Oh!' and once more Patty shrugged her shoulders, 'she may want you for a victim, too, you know.'

‘What folly!’

‘Oh, but I don’t know that it’s folly. Adventuresses, like she is, think a great deal of a title, you know.’

Sir Ralph gave an impatient gesture.

‘It was I who sought Miss Ingram’s acquaintance,’ he said, ‘not Miss Ingram mine.’

‘That may be, but my advice would be to drop her acquaintance as quickly as possible; at least we shall.’

Sir Ralph made no reply to this. He felt intensely annoyed with Patty May, and left her as soon as possible, but Patty smiled a little triumphantly after he was gone.

‘I think I have spoilt her little game,’ she thought; ‘and he never suspected me, I am almost sure.’

CHAPTER VIII.

GATHERING CLOUDS.

WHILST Patty May was abusing her upstairs, Laura Ingram was sitting downstairs talking gravely and quietly to her old friend Mr George Gifford of Suffolk.

‘And you say you have got one story accepted?’ said Mr Gifford.

‘Yes,’ answered Laura, ‘but it’s only a short story.’

‘And will not be highly remunerated, I fear?’

‘It seemed quite a large sum to me,’ smiled Laura, ‘five pounds—my first earnings.’

‘Five pounds,’ repeated Mr Gifford reflectively, ‘but it takes a great many five pounds to live?’

‘Still it is a beginning.’

‘Yes, no doubt, and also an assistance to an income, but I am half afraid you know—’

‘That I shall come to starve?’

‘Please do not speak thus; but I know living in London is expensive, and your capital is so small.’

‘I daresay you think I have made too large a hole in it already, but I hope soon to be paid for another story, and then I shall begin to save.’

‘It is a very precarious way of living,’ said Mr Gifford gravely, ‘and I am

going to take the privilege of an old friend, and tell you that you do not look very well, and rather worried.'

'I have been worried to-day.'

'I am sorry for that. Can I help you in any way?'

'No; it is only about a spiteful letter, but it is a very strange thing.'

'Will you tell me what it is?'

'Well I know a gentleman who has received an anonymous letter abusing me.'

'Abusing you! How could anyone abuse you?'

'That was what I flattered myself,' smiled Laura, 'but it seems I flattered myself in vain.'

'Did you see the letter?'

'No; it was too bad to show me, I believe.'

‘Perhaps the gentleman invented the whole thing?’

‘Oh, no, I am sure he did not. He came to me and asked me if I knew of any enemy I had, and I candidly answered I did not.’

‘You could have no enemy—unless it was a jealous woman.’

Laura laughed softly.

‘How long is it since you began to pay compliments, Mr Gifford?’

‘I did not mean it as a compliment.’

‘Well, it was a very pretty one. But now tell me about all the people at Suffold?’

‘The despised country town?’ said George Gifford, a little sadly.

‘Please do not say that. I have some very kindly memories of Suffold.’

A faint flush spread over George

Gifford's pleasant good-looking face as he listened to these words.

'I am glad to hear that,' he said. 'Well, all those whom you knew are well, I think. One of the vicar's daughters is married to Mr Masterman, the curate, and the other they say is engaged, and for the rest, I think, everything is the same as when you went away.'

'And your father?'

'My father is very well. We have got a cousin to live with us at Red House now to manage the house.'

And here George Gifford sighed, and Laura blushed.

They were both thinking at this moment of whom he had wished to be the mistress and manager of Red House, but neither alluded to it.

‘And is your cousin young or old?’ asked Laura.

‘Neither one nor the other, I should say,’ answered George Gifford, smiling. ‘However, the old gentleman likes her, and gets on very well with her, and a house is never the same without a woman.’

And again George Gifford sighed.

Laura felt sorry for him at this moment. No good woman is really ever indifferent to the honest love of an honest man. She did not love him; knew she could never love him, but she liked and respected him, and knew she could depend on his constant kindness and friendship.

Therefore, when he asked her if she would drive with him to one of the Exhibitions, she hardly liked to

refuse. He had arranged all her father's affairs and her own free of charge, and she felt grateful to him, and did not like to wound him in any way.

'It will be quite a charity if you will, Miss Ingram,' urged George Gifford, 'for otherwise I shall have to go alone, and I always find public places so desolate when I am alone.'

So after a little hesitation Laura consented to accompany him. He hailed a hansom when they reached Regent Street, and handed Laura in; and as he did this, as ill-luck would have it, a pair of jealous gloomy eyes fell on Laura's slender, black-robed form.

This observer was Sir Ralph Woodland. He had left Patty's room disgusted and annoyed, but also with

a conviction in his mind that the two anonymous letters about Laura Ingram were certainly very disquieting and disturbing to anyone who had a regard for her. And then her own positive refusal of his offer of marriage seemed to him utterly unaccountable. She had said there were reasons, a reason that it never could be. What could these reasons, or reason be? Sir Ralph had asked himself with an angry, uneasy heart. Was it some secret knowledge that she was unworthy to hold the position that he had offered her? He knew nothing of her past life, and he remembered now that the first time he had seen her he had been struck with a look in her dark eyes which told of some hidden sorrow. She had roused her-

self and gone on with her painting, but still it was there. 'And then these confounded letters must have something to go upon,' Sir Ralph told himself uneasily. Altogether he was in anything but a happy frame of mind after he left Patty May's rooms. He kept strolling up and down Regent Street, thinking what he must do. Should he tell Laura of this second letter? But no; he had better not see her again to-day at least. And just as he made that decision he did see her.

He saw her handed into a cab by a good-looking young man, and he saw the good-looking young man take a seat by her side, and he saw Laura look at him and smile!

Something very like an oath escaped

his lips, and then a hard, grim smile distorted his mouth.

‘It was all true, then,’ he decided at this moment. The girl he had asked that very day to be his wife, the girl that he had wished to take his dead mother’s place, and whom he had believed cared for him, was carrying on an intrigue with another man.

Sir Ralph never reflected how unjust might be such a conclusion. He had quick passions, and he felt himself degraded.

‘What a fool I have been to be taken in with a pair of handsome eyes,’ he told himself scornfully. ‘Well, she had the decency to refuse me, but perhaps she couldn’t help herself. She is probably bound to this other man—I am well out it.’

It was very easy to say all this, but it is not so easy to put a strong feeling away from one's heart when once it has got there. Sir Ralph scarcely knew himself how much he had cared for Laura Ingram until the belief that she was unworthy of his love cut him to the soul. He was so restless and unhappy during the next few days after he had seen Laura handed into a cab by Mr Gifford, and read the two anonymous letters against her character, that he suddenly determined to leave town and go to Paris.

‘She will get knocked out of my head there, I suppose,’ he thought bitterly, and so he went away, without a word to the girl of whom he ever thought.

In the meanwhile Laura naturally won-

dered what had become of him. George Gifford had left town the day after she had gone to the Exhibition with him, and she, of course, knew nothing of the second anonymous letter that Patty May had shown Sir Ralph. She also wished to see Sir Ralph about something that had occurred to her when she had called on Mr Valentine Ross, which had greatly disturbed her.

Mr Ross had received her smilingly, and when he looked on her handsome face, quite understood, he thought, the cause of Sir Ralph Woodland's interest in her writings. He wished her story slightly shortened, and he proceeded to point out the alteration he required made, and after he had done so, Laura said to him courteously,—

‘I ought to thank you for sending me the money for it so promptly.’

Mr Valentine Ross raised his light eyebrows in surprise, and an odd expression passed over his face. ‘Was this young lady sarcastic?’ he was thinking.

‘Sir Ralph Woodland gave the money to me,’ continued Laura, ‘and he said I need not write to thank you for it, as he had already done so.’

Then Mr Ross’s blue eyes shone with amusement, and he smiled, and showed his white teeth.

‘Sir Ralph must have taken time by the forelock,’ he said. ‘May I ask what he gave you?’

‘Five pounds,’ answered Laura, surprised.

‘Five pounds!’ repeated Mr Ross,
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yet more amused. 'Well, take my advice, Miss Ingram, and always be paid through Sir Ralph Woodland.'

'I do not understand you.'

'Never mind, take my advice,' laughed Mr Ross.

'But you do not mean that—that Sir Ralph did not receive this five pounds from you?'

'I shall betray no secrets, but it is well to have so rich and generous a friend.'

These words made Laura feel exceedingly uncomfortable. She remembered that Sir Ralph had said, 'Ross is rather a forward fellow,' so she did not care to bandy any further words with him on the subject, but shortly afterwards took her leave, carrying her story away with her for correction. But

she determined to ask Sir Ralph all about it the first time she saw him.

But a week passed away, and she neither saw nor heard from him. Then a fortnight, and a strange feeling of uneasiness and unrest crept into Laura's heart. She knew his address in town, and also the name of his country place, but she did not like to write after the conversation which had passed between them the last time they met.

'I cannot marry him,' Laura thought many times, 'but we might remain friends. I told him this, but he seems to have forgotten me.'

In the meantime she had once or twice met Patty and Ella May on the stairs, and they had coolly ignored her presence. Once they actually met at the door of the house, but Patty and

Ella turned their heads another way, and pretended not to see her. Laura naturally felt annoyed, and wondered if they had anything to do with the disappearance of Sir Ralph.

Altogether she began to feel very dreary and weary. She had written two other short stories, and they had both been rejected by three different magazines. Then she had sent them to Mr Valentine Ross, who wrote in the reply that, as he had not yet found room for the one of hers that he already held, he feared it would be impossible, for that year at least, to look at another. He added in his letter that accompanied the returned MS.,—
'Have you seen anything lately of our friend Sir Ralph Woodland? I have not.'

All this was very discouraging, and Laura found that the loss of Sir Ralph's occasional society made all the difference to her life. However, she worked bravely on. She began a three-volume novel, and sometimes forgot her own troubles in thinking of imaginary ones. But these troubles threatened to become real and tangible. She had been six months in London, and, with the exception of the solitary five-pound note given her by Sir Ralph, she had made nothing. The golden gates of fortune seemed closed to her, and the bitter ways of poverty to lie at her feet.

At last she determined to leave the rooms where she was, and go to cheaper ones. She did this most unwillingly. To go from Maddox Street

seemed to cut off her last chance of again seeing Sir Ralph Woodland. He would not know her new address, and as he had seemingly so completely dropped her acquaintance, how could she let him know it?

However, it could not be helped. She could not afford to go on paying for the rooms in Maddox Street, and so removed to cheap lodgings in Edgware Road. There she went on with her novel, and tried to sell some of her paintings, but with the same result as her stories. It was the old story! The weary struggle for fame which does not come.

And so month after month passed away. The house where she lived was dusty and dreary, the landlady stout, dirty and exacting, and at nights given

to over strong potations. But Laura tried to buoy herself up about the novel.

‘If I can get it published,’ she often thought, ‘he may see it advertised; he may go to the publishers and find out where I live, and then he will surely come to see me.’

She could not understand how the few words that she had said to him about not marrying him had so completely severed their lives. He had seemed to care for her, and to be discouraged so soon!

At last the novel was done in the sweet spring-time, when the parks lay in their fresh beauty, and the sons and daughters of wealth rode or sat beneath the green trees. The sons and daughters of toil sometimes caught

a glimpse of them also, and forgot for a while the carking cares of their daily lives. The beautiful sunshine is for all, and brightens the meanest dwelling. It shone into Laura's dingy sitting-room; it fell on her face, which had changed and saddened.

'He will return to town for the season,' she told herself, as she felt the warmth of the glad beams. 'I may see him in the Park.'

She had formed a theory in her mind that in his disappointment at her refusal he had probably left England. But he would come back. And so Laura, in her black gown which had not improved by wear, took many a walk in the spring days alone in the Park, and looked at the riders on the Row with wistful eyes. Sir Ralph,

she knew, rode regularly when in town, but for a long time she saw nothing of his tall figure and strong, dark face.

In the meanwhile she had sent her novel to a publisher's, and it had been returned to her with a civil note of thanks and regret. Then she tried another and another. The third wrote to say his reader's opinion was not highly favourable, but that if she were willing to advance a certain sum of money, he would venture to publish it on the system of half-profits after all expenses had been paid. The sum required to be advanced was fifty pounds, and fifty pounds would nearly make an end of Laura's little capital.

Still she was so weary of waiting,

so tired of disappointment, that she resolved to risk it. She knew it was very rash, but, like all young writers, she had a great belief in the first big child of her brain. She thought once more of writing to consult George Gifford at Suffolk, and then remembered with a blush it would almost be like asking him to advance the money. So with trembling fingers she drew the cheque, and with a sinking heart awaited the result.

And at this very time drove up to her old lodgings in Maddox Street the very man of whom she had thought, and was still thinking so much. Sir Ralph Woodland had tired of a somewhat reckless life abroad, and had returned to England, and a strong feeling had come over him once again to see the

dark-eyed girl, whom he never forgot. He had begun 'also to ask himself had he not judged her too harshly, and on too slight evidence? At all events, he would go to see her; and so he drove to Maddox Street, and was informed there by the maid that Miss Ingram had left some months since.

'Do you know where she is? Did she leave no address?' inquired Sir Ralph, with a cold, strange feeling of disappointment at his heart.

The maid could not tell him, but at this moment the light little feet of Patty May were hurrying down the staircase. She had seen Sir Ralph's cab drive to the house door; she had seen him alight, and she was not going to miss such an opportunity.

She was in the hall with outstretched hand before he turned away from the door.

‘Sir Ralph!’ she cried, with real pleasure lighting her pretty face. ‘We are still here, you see. Where have you been all this time? We thought you were lost.’

‘I have been abroad,’ said Sir Ralph.

‘Come in. I am so pleased you have come to see us,’ continued Patty excitedly; and Sir Ralph found it impossible to tell the eager girl his real errand to the house.

He therefore followed Patty upstairs, and sat talking to her for a little while, and then, in a somewhat husky voice, inquired for Laura.

‘Is Miss Ingram still here?’ he asked.

‘Oh, no,’ answered Patty, putting on quite a shocked air. ‘She has been gone for months—there was a great scandal about her, you know—she went away with a young man.’

Sir Ralph made no answer to Patty’s mendacious words.

He sat silent, also, when she prattled on about the anonymous warning they had both received, and then rose and went away, in spite of Patty’s entreaties, with a certain grey look on his face she had never seen there before.

And, some days after this, he saw standing beneath the fresh-leafed trees in the Park, as he rode slowly along, a tall, slender, somewhat shabbily-dressed figure, whom he instantly recognised.

It was Laura Ingram, and her dark eyes were fixed on his face, and a

sudden flush rose to her cheeks as she bowed and smiled.

But Sir Ralph did not smile.

He touched his hat, bowed coldly, and passed on.

CHAPTER IX.

A FIRST NOVEL.

LAURA walked no more in the Park after this meeting. She turned, and went back to her dreary home with a bowed head and a stricken heart. For she never for a moment deceived herself. The man of whom she had thought so much; the man who at one time had liked her well enough to ask her to be his wife, had now plainly shown her that he did not wish to see her again.

‘He has learnt to care for someone else, I suppose,’ thought Laura, with a sigh, and the idea was inexpressibly painful and bitter to her. It made the daily increasing anxieties of her life more galling; it made the spring-time dull, and her work a labour.

But still it must go on. The knowledge that she was nearly at the end of her resources was a spur she could not ignore. So she sat weaving stories of destinies bright or sad, while her own lay overshadowed with such heavy clouds. At last—about the middle of summer—her novel was published, and when Laura received six copies that the publisher sent her, hope once more rose in her saddened heart.

The book was fairly well got up, and to see her own name on the fresh pages, for the publisher had advised her to drop her *nom de plume* in the novel, no doubt sent a thrill of pride through her whole being. She packed a copy up and sent it to George Gifford, at Suffolk, writing his name in it, 'with kind regards.'

In return for this gift she received a letter in which Mr Gifford's congratulations were mingled with anxiety for the writer's position. George Gifford did not know the terms on which this book had been published, but the manager of the bank in Suffolk, where Laura's small capital had been placed, had given him a hint which had disquieted him exceedingly.

This manager had been dining at Red House on the very day when Laura's book had arrived there, and it was lying in state on the drawing-room table before dinner, and George Gifford pointed it out, not without some little pride, to his guest.

'Ah,' said this Mr Hay, taking one of the volumes up, 'I am very glad to see this, for I was afraid, poor girl—'

And then he paused, and looked significantly at George Gifford.

'What is this young lady like?' asked Miss Lindsay, who was George Gifford's cousin, and lived now at Red House as housekeeper and companion to her uncle, old Mr Gifford.

'She's a very handsome girl,' replied Mr Hay; 'but the old Major

was an extravagant fellow, and left his affairs in a sad state, and his daughter badly off, so it's very well if she can earn her livelihood by her pen, for she has little or nothing else.'

George Gifford did not speak, but he listened, and wondered if Mr Hay knew more than he did. Then, after dinner, when Miss Lindsay had retired, and old Mr Gifford had subsided into a nap in an armchair, he once more turned the conversation to Laura.

'I sincerely hope, I am sure, that Miss Ingram's book may be a success,' he said.

'And so do I,' replied Mr Hay, cracking his walnuts and sipping his port. 'How much do you suppose,

now, Gifford, she will make by this book, for, to tell you the truth, she is confoundedly near the end of her tether regarding any money she has in the bank.'

'I am very sorry to hear that,' answered George Gifford, gravely. 'I know she was paid for a short story she wrote, but it is a most precarious life.'

'And such hard work, too, I should think,' said Mr Hay. 'Well, penniless women must do something, and I believe Miss Ingram was well educated. Poor girl, I hope she will get on.'

This was all that was said on the subject, but it made Gifford uneasy. He really liked Laura Ingram, and not all the attentions which his cousin, Miss Lindsay, had lavished on him

during the last few months had served to put Laura out of his mind. Therefore, when he wrote to thank her for the book, he hinted that he hoped she had been well paid for it.

Laura smiled sadly enough when she read this letter. Her fifty pounds was gone, and as yet she had not received a farthing in return. And so another month passed away, and then her affairs became almost desperate. She had not succeeded in getting either another story or a painting disposed of; she had pinched herself in her daily food, and a biscuit and a glass of milk frequently served her for dinner, and she had got into arrears with her landlady for three weeks' lodgings.

This lady was not a very pleasant

person to deal with, and had observed that her young lodger was getting thinner and paler, and that her dress was shabby, and that she generally went out to dine.

‘I don’t believe she gets any dinner, that’s my opinion,’ she confided to a neighbour, who also let lodgings. ‘And as for them books what do they make? A set of trash the most of them, so, if Miss Ingram doesn’t stump down on Saturday, she must go.’

She more than hinted this unpleasant fact to Laura during the same evening when she had returned hot and tired from, as usual, an unsuccessful errand. The poor girl was quite worn out. It was a fiery August day, and Laura felt utterly weary

when she reached Edgware Road, and weak from want of food. She sat down in her dingy room and cried bitterly. And when she was in this depressed condition, Mrs Fryer, the landlady, entered the room with wrath in her watery eyes, and a considerable amount of brandy on her brain.

‘Oh, you’re there, are you, Miss Ingram,’ she began; ‘well, I would just like a word with you, please. You see you’ll owe me three weeks’ lodgings on Saturday, and you’ll oblige me by settling.’

‘I am very sorry, Mrs Fryer,’ replied Laura, with a sinking heart, ‘I’ve been expecting some money from my publishers or you should have had the money before.’

‘Oh, I know nothing about pub-

lishers! Their money may be good for anything I know, but I want mine, and cannot depend on their vagaries.'

'I will try to pay you,' said Laura, with the sad humility born of poverty.

'I must be paid, and on Saturday,' retorted Mrs Fryer, her red visage growing scarlet. 'How can I meet my rent and rates do you think if my lodgers don't pay me? Why, there's a notice lying downstairs that the water will be turned off if the water-rate isn't paid on Monday. It's ridiculous! Ladies, indeed! Fine ladies that can't pay for their rooms!'

'I will pay you on Saturday,' said Laura in desperation; and, muttering to herself, Mrs Fryer, having received this promise, went out of the room, slamming the door behind her.

Laura spent a miserable night after this, but she resolved in the morning to go down to the publishers of her novel and inquire what the profits were likely to be from it, and ask an advance on them. She was at this time literally almost penniless, and had no money to pay for her rooms, nor indeed to live. Mr Hay, the banker at Suffolk, had good reason to say she had nearly exhausted her means, for she had actually done so. She had risked all on the fifty pounds she had advanced to have her novel published, and now she was going to learn its fate.

So she started for the publishers, and was received by one of the firm civilly, though by no means with effusion. She was nervous, and no wonder

when so much depended on this interview. But she sat down, and, after a moment's hesitation, plucked up courage.

‘I — have come to ask about my book, Mr Brooke,’ she said. ‘I hope it is doing fairly well?’

Mr Brooke cleared his throat and cast down his eyes. He did not care to look at the eager young face before him at this moment.

‘I am sorry it is not, Miss Ingram,’ he answered.

‘Not well?’ asked Laura, almost with a gasp.

‘No, not at all well. It is a most difficult thing to launch a young author, you know. Sometimes first books do take, but not as a rule, and yours has been no exception. It has fallen very flat.’

‘And—will there be no profits?’

‘Not a penny; in fact, we will lose by it, and it won’t pay the expenses of publication. However, don’t lose heart,’ for he saw the grey look of despair that was spreading over Laura’s face; ‘another may succeed, you know, but there will be no profits to divide this time, of that I am quite certain; in fact, it is no use going on binding any more of the edition, for they won’t sell.’

Laura said nothing more. She felt faint and ill, as though all strength had suddenly passed away from her limbs. She rose and went out of the office, and Mr Brooke’s parting words fell on dulled ears. It was all over she told herself as she went along the crowded street outside, noticing no

one. She had risked everything on this book, and it had failed. She could not be an author now; she had not the means to live while she wrote another book, and therefore she must turn to something else.

‘I could be a governess, I suppose,’ she thought gloomily; ‘but in the meantime what shall I do to pay Mrs Fryer?’

Suddenly she remembered George Gifford.

‘He would lend me ten pounds, I think, and when I get a situation I will repay him. Ah, he warned me—he knew the world better than I did, and what a hard and bitter struggle it is to live. But I must pay that dreadful woman; this is Thursday; I will write to George

Gifford to-day, and ask him to help me in this dreadful strait.'

Having made up her mind to do this she lost no time in carrying out her determination. It was very bitter and painful for her to do it, but still she felt George Gifford would not grudge the money to save her from the galling humiliation of her position towards her landlady. Therefore, when she arrived at her poor rooms she wrote to him in the following words:—

‘DEAR MR GIFFORD,—I have had a very great blow to-day, for I went to the publishers and found that my novel has been a complete failure. It was published on the half-profit system, and I was obliged to advance fifty pounds towards the expenses. The publishers

assure me there will be no profits, and that they will lose by it. I shall therefore be forced to give up the idea of being an author, and try to get some situation or other. In the meantime, I am almost quite penniless, and owe my landlady three weeks' rent. Under these painful circumstances, I am going to ask you to lend me ten pounds until I can get a situation, when I shall be sure to repay you. Do you remember you warned me, and I said I had enough to live on for a year, and that before the year was over I should be earning my own living? Little more than the year is over, and I have earned nothing but five pounds! Forgive me for asking this favour of you, and troubling you with my annoyances, but you are an old

friend.—With kind regards, sincerely
yours, LAURA INGRAM.'

She went out to post this letter after she had written it, and spent a miserable, restless, nay, almost a sleepless night. If he should refuse? But still she did not think he would, and her belief was fully justified, for by eleven the next day she received a telegram from George Gifford, which Laura read with a grateful heart.

'I will send what you require with the greatest pleasure. You will receive it by the first post to-morrow morning. In the meantime have no anxiety. GIFFORD.'

Laura's eyes filled with tears after she read these brief words. How good

he was, how kind and thoughtful to telegraph, and thus relieve her mind, she thought. She knew that she had no grace to expect from Mrs Fryer, and the idea of being turned into the street, homeless, had filled her with absolute dismay. Now she could pay this woman and have a few days to look around.

And the next morning's post did bring her the letter she expected with such feverish anxiety. It was a registered letter, and as she tore it open she saw that it contained two five-pound notes, a cheque, and a letter from Mr Gifford.

She looked at the cheque, it was drawn in her name on a London Bank for fifty pounds and bore George Gifford's signature. Then she read the letter she held in her trembling hand.

‘MY DEAR MISS INGRAM,—I thank you very much for your letter, and I have the greatest possible pleasure in forwarding you the little sum you require. I also enclose a cheque for fifty pounds, and have to-day lodged a further sum of one hundred pounds in your name in the same bank, which you can draw out as you require it. Thus you will have no reason to give up your writing, or think of going to a situation. For whatever your publishers may say, I am sure the book is a clever one that you sent me, and I think you should have had your lawyer with you when you made your agreement. However, we can talk this over when I see you, as I propose to be in town on Monday next, and shall give myself the pleasure of calling to see

you. I am, indeed, pleased that you did not forget your promise of remembering your country friend when you required anything. I propose calling about four o'clock on Monday, and, with kind regards,—Remain yours faithfully,

GEORGE GIFFORD.'

Laura heaved a great sigh of relief after she had read this letter, and then she sat down with it in her hand and thought of the kindly writer. But could she take his money, this fifty pounds, she might never be able to repay? Still her luck might turn. She had heard of cruel hours of want and despair which some now famous writers had once gone through, and might not fortune smile on her also? At all events she could now pay the odious

woman of the house, and with a lightened heart, she presently was proceeding down stairs for the purpose of getting one of her five-pound notes changed, when she met Mrs Fryer, who eyed her suspiciously.

‘You’re not going out, are ye, Miss Ingram?’ she said.

‘Yes, I am for a short time,’ answered Laura.

‘Then I wish you could settle with me before you do,’ replied Mrs Fryer, in a bellicose tone. ‘This is the day, you’ll be pleased to remember, that you promised — to pay the four pounds ten you are owing me.’

‘Yes, I know,’ said Laura, with a mild feeling of triumph in her heart, ‘and if you can change me a five-

pound note I will settle with you before I go out.'

It was positively amusing to watch the woman's change of expression.

'Oh! a five-pound note,' she said. 'Yes, miss, I can send out and get it changed in a minute.'

Upon this Laura produced her purse, and her five-pound note, and placed the money in Mrs Fryer's hand.

'If you bring me the change and the receipt it will be all right,' said Laura, 'and I will wait for you upstairs.'

Never had Mrs Fryer been so surprised, and there was actually a feeling of almost disappointment in her heart that she was unable to indulge in all the unpleasant things she had fixed to say. Still money is money, and with

the five-pound note in her hand she ran out of the house to her neighbour, Mrs Pond, who was standing in the area steps engaging in bargaining for vegetables from a hand-cart.

She was just concluding her business when she saw Mrs Fryer with her cap awry, and excitement depicted on her ruddled face, hurry from her own house to hers.

‘Good morning, Mrs Fryer,’ she said, ‘come in and have a bit chat.’

The two women descended the area steps together, Mrs Pond carrying her basket of potatoes and carrots, and Mrs Fryer brimful with her news.

And they had scarcely reached the underground kitchen together, when she burst forth,—

‘She has paid me!’

‘What, Miss Ingram?’ answered Mrs Pond in surprise, setting down her basket on the kitchen table. ‘Not in full, surely?’

‘Yes, in full; she owed four pounds ten, and here’s the five-pound note she put in my hand to settle, and she’s waiting for the change.’

Both the women then examined the crisp bank note fresh from the bank, and could find no fault with it, and then they looked at each other.

‘I wonder how she came by it,’ remarked Mrs Pond, ‘she seemed poor enough.’

‘A letter came for her this morning,’ replied Mrs Fryer.

‘It came in that then you may depend. Well, Mrs Fryer, it’s well you’ve got your money. I think we

should have a drop to drink your health on it.'

'All right; I'll just get the change for her ladyship, for I can tell you she was as grand as could be when she gave me the note. I'll get it changed at the 'Saxon,' and I'll buy a bottle of brandy at the same time, and you come in and have a taste, for it's a nasty misty morning, and catches one by the throat.'

Mrs Fryer accordingly carried out this plan, and quickly went up and rapped at Laura's sitting-room door.

'Come in,' said Laura, and the landlady entered, all smiles and blandishments.

'Here is your change, Miss Ingram,' she said, 'and the receipt, and many thanks for the money. I am sure I

hope you are comfortable here,' she continued, looking contemplatively round her dingy apartment. 'I was thinking yesterday you wanted a new pair of shades. What colour do you prefer? White, or one of those mixed up things, that I am told you hartist ladies set such a store on?'

Laura could not help smiling.

'I really have no choice,' she said.

'Oh, but I wish to please you, Miss Ingram, and consult you on the decorations of your apartment. I'll see about the shades on Monday, and by that time you'll have thought out your choice of the colours.'

After this the landlady left the room, and Laura smiled a little bitterly after she took her departure.

‘She’s only like the rest,’ she reflected, ‘and yet not all.’

And at this moment she thought of George Gifford.

CHAPTER X.

A FRIEND IN NEED.

LAURA awoke the next morning with a feeling of rest, as though she had escaped from some great danger before she even remembered what had happened the previous day.

And it had been a great danger. But for the kindly friend who had helped her, where might she now have been? Homeless and penniless in the vast city, which gives so warm a

welcome to the rich, and so cold a shelter to the poor!

‘I will work until I can repay him. Oh! how hard I will work,’ thought the girl, turning on her pillow with a restless sigh, and thinking of the cheque of fifty pounds which lay uncashed in her escritoire. And as she looked at that escritoire, her thoughts went back to the weird secret it contained—to the letter her dead father had left behind to darken her young life. In the overpowering anxiety she had lately gone through, she scarcely had had time to dwell on this. The fight for daily bread had been too keen, the struggle for life too great. Now she remembered it only too plainly, and the wreck it had brought to her own happiness.

‘But for that—’ And she sighed deeply.

But for that, she might not now have been alone. But for that the strong, dark face that she had loved so well might not have looked coldly on her. How often Laura had mused on that chance meeting in the Park, when Sir Ralph had bowed to her with such marked unfriendliness. The only possible way she could account for his conduct was that his feelings had completely changed to her. ‘He cares for, perhaps he is married to, someone else,’ she had told herself a thousand times.

‘He had a brief fancy for me, and it has passed away, and yet I thought his nature was not fickle, but strong and deep—but it could not have been.’

One after the other these thoughts passed through her mind this Sunday morning, as she lay reviewing her past life, while the bells were ringing for early service, and already the hum and bustle of the street was stirring below. And now? What was before her now? The endless toil of a woman who has to make her daily bread. Laura's first experience in novel writing had been a failure, her publisher had assured her, therefore she had no bright prospects before her as regards literature. Hers was not to be one of those rare and swift ascents to fame that she had read of, and dreamed of, and on which she had built her hopes.

‘But, perhaps, I may make enough to exist on,’ she reflected. But it

was only 'perhaps.' It was a dreary enough forecast, and when she thought of the heavy debt she must incur even to try to continue her career as an author, the outlook was not cheerful.

But we must live. How often is that sometimes cruel necessity forced on our minds. Live whether we are happy or miserable; live whether we are rich or poor, until we are summoned hence. Laura thought this as she rose and dressed in the August sunshine. Then she went downstairs, and found the breakfast table laid out with new attention to cleanliness and comfort. True she had purchased some small luxuries the afternoon before in the shape of a fresh pat of butter, a new-laid egg, and a brown

loaf. But Mrs Fryer was bent on being agreeable to her lodger. And her attentions continued during the whole day. It was a quiet Sunday for Laura. She did not go to church, but sat at the window looking down on the passers-by, each with his or her care, pent silent in the breast.

‘I wonder if some of them are as weary as I am,’ she kept thinking, watching the human stream. For she was weary, very weary. Weary of the joyless struggle, ‘the constant anguish of patience.’ She had literally done nothing after more than twelve months of hard work, she told herself; work begun so full of hope. At last she turned from the window with a restless sigh, and took up a book to try to beguile her mind. But she was in no mood for

reading, her own thoughts overpowered the thoughts of the writer, and came crowding through her brain whether she would or no.

And so the day wore away, and the morrow came, and in the afternoon George Clifford had said he would call. Laura womanlike made a little effort to improve the appearance of her room before the arrival of her visitor. She went out and bought a bunch of red roses at a flower stand in the street, and she shook the curtains into more graceful folds. She felt a little excited too, and not a little ashamed. She had been forced to ask help from this generous friend, but she felt herself degraded by having done so. She, so proud and self-reliant, shrank from the very name of borrowing.

She asked Mrs Fryer to bring up some tea at four o'clock, and cut a plate of bread and butter.

'As I expect a friend,' she said, with a faint blush stealing over her pale face.

'Oh, a friend?' replied Mrs Fryer in her would-be agreeable manner.

'Yes, a gentleman,' said Laura.

'Oh, a gentleman?' again answered Mrs Fryer, and a peculiar look flitted over her ruddled face. She guessed at this moment where her rent had come from. But she also reflected 'good money is good money wherever it comes from.'

'Yes, my lawyer,' said Laura quickly ; 'so will you have tea ready by four, Mrs Fryer, as he said he would call then.'

‘Yes, certainly, Miss Ingram,’ answered the portly landlady, and she bustled out of the room, and was as good as her word.

And precisely at four o’clock a hansom drove up to Mrs Fryer’s house, and from it descended what Mrs Fryer afterwards designated to her friend, Mrs Pond, ‘a fine well-built young man.’ This was George Gifford, and Mrs Fryer herself opened the door for him, and ushered him upstairs to Laura’s room.

Laura rose hastily to receive him, with a flush on her cheeks and a fast-beating heart. They were both, in fact, agitated, but it was Laura who spoke first.

‘I do not know how to thank you,’ she faltered.

‘There is nothing to thank me for,

answered George Gifford with grave kindness, still holding her hand ; ‘and I thank you very much for treating me as a friend.’

‘A friend indeed!’ murmured Laura, almost below her breath, and a mist came over her eyes of unshed tears, which she turned away her head to hide.

‘I hope you are comfortable here?’ said George Gifford, glancing round the shabby room by way of changing the conversation.

‘Oh, fairly well,’ answered Laura, with a faint attempt at a smile ; ‘but I have been too much occupied, too—miserable, in fact, to care about my surroundings.’

‘It is too noisy a place for a writer, I should say.’

‘Yes — but what can poor people do?’

‘Come, you must not talk thus— And have you been well all this hot weather?’

And Gifford’s kindly grey eyes rested inquiringly on Laura’s altered face.

‘Not very,’ she answered; ‘anxiety and worry are not good for one, you know.’

‘Anything but that; but you must have no more anxieties; remember in future, I am your lawyer, your banker, and your friend.’

‘How good you are!’ said Laura, with genuine emotion.

‘Please do not say that. But you must let me take you about a bit while I am in town. Would you like to go down the river for a day?’

‘Yes, very much; to look again on the green grass would be a great treat after the noise and dust of the streets.’

‘Suppose we go to-morrow, then, and we can dine at the “Star and Garter” at Richmond, and have a day’s holiday?’

‘It is very kind of you—but—’

‘No, Miss Ingram, I won’t listen to any “buts,”’ smiled George Gifford, cheerily.

He looked well, and brown, and happy, and presently, after they had had some tea, he proposed they should go out.

‘I want to look at the shops,’ he said; ‘and I suppose I ought to take my cousin, Anna Lindsay, some article of female finery or other, for one’s

relations always expect something when one's been a visit to town; so will you help me to choose something?'

'With pleasure, if you will tell me what the young lady is like?'

'Oh, well, I scarcely know,' laughed Gifford, good - temperedly. 'She's not plain, I think, exactly; she's tall.'

'What a description!' smiled Laura.

'One never looks at one's relations, you know,' answered Gifford, still laughing.

The idea seemed to amuse him for some reason or other; and then he told her about his father, and her old acquaintance at Suffolk, and exerted himself apparently to make her forget her troubles.

They drove to Regent Street, and George Gifford made various purchases.

Then when they were at one big shop he looked at Laura half-shyly, half-pleasantly.

‘I want to buy you something,’ he said; ‘what may I buy you?’

But Laura shrank back.

‘No,’ she said, and she shook her head.

‘But why? An old friend like I am, there can surely be no reason why I should not.’

‘I should rather not take anything, really—I am too deeply indebted to you already.’

‘What nonsense! Wouldn’t you like one of those black lace mantilla things, or whatever you call them?’ went on George Gifford, pointing out with his stick at some handsome Spanish black lace mantillas hanging in the window.

The obsequious shopman who was serving them speedily spread some similar ones before George Gifford and Laura, and in spite of Laura's whispered remonstrances, Gifford purchased the handsomest and most expensive one he could find.

Then, after they returned to their cab, Laura said :

‘I really must scold you, Mr Gifford.’

‘Well, I shall be very submissive,’ he answered smiling.

‘To buy such an expensive thing as that! It is quite unsuitable for me, you know; you must take it to your cousin at Suffolk.’

‘It would be quite unsuitable for her,’ laughed Gifford, good-naturedly; ‘a thing like that requires a graceful

woman ; now, poor Anna—' and again he laughed. 'But where shall we go next?'

'I shall go into no more shops with you,' said Laura positively.

'Well, you'll go to one of the theatres to-night, won't you, so I'll go and buy stall tickets.'

'No, really I will not; will you take me home now, Mr Gifford?'

'Yes, if you like, but do go to one of the theatres?'

But Laura declined, and so they drove back to Edgware Road, and when they arrived at Mrs Fryer's, Gifford, after handing Laura out, drew from the cab all the various purchases he had made, including the black lace mantilla, and followed Laura into the house, to the intense curiosity of Mrs

Fryer, who had opened the door for them.

‘I don’t believe he’s her lawyer,’ she afterwards told Mrs Pond; ‘lawyer’s ain’t so fond of parting with their money; and if you had seen the sight of parcels he brought in; pounds and pounds worth!’

In the meanwhile, in the drawing-room, Laura had found courage to approach the subject which had been on her mind ever since George Gifford’s arrival.

‘About that cheque for fifty pounds, Mr Gifford,’ she said; ‘I cannot take so much, but if you will lend me twenty-five pounds of it, by the time that is spent, I surely will have made some money, and as soon as ever I can I will return it to you.’

George Gifford turned round and took her hand, for he had been placing some of the parcels he had carried in on the couch, when Laura addressed him.

‘You scolded me a little while ago,’ he said, ‘and now I am going to scold you. What nonsense to talk about a little sum like that! Why, you are welcome to six times, and six times over the amount. Have you cashed the cheque yet?’

‘No, indeed, I have not.’

‘I’ll get it cashed for you in the morning then, and you’ve not forgotten I’ve lodged a hundred pounds in your name at the Union Bank. I have brought you your cheque-book, you see. And as he spoke he produced a cheque-book from his pocket and held it towards Laura.

‘Oh! Mr Gifford, you are far too good to me. I never can repay all your goodness!’

‘Yes, you can,’ answered George Gifford with some significance. ‘But you are tired now, so I will go away, but to-morrow morning may I call at twelve, and we’ll have a long day on the river?’

‘Yes,’ answered Laura, and then they shook hands and he went away, and after he was gone Laura went to the window and stood looking absently down on the street below. She was thinking of George Gifford. How kind, how generous he was, how thoughtful for others, what a true and faithful friend.

‘I wish I had married him long ago, before all this pain and trouble

came to me,' she reflected. 'I wish I had never seen Ralph Woodland's face.'

Oh! why could she not forget him! She believed at this moment that George Gifford still liked her, but she knew also that the mysterious passion we call love would never thrill through her breast for him. She respected him, she had a strong regard for him, but that subtle instinct which draws two souls so near, was utterly absent from her heart.

She felt restless and disturbed. The cheque-book that he had brought her was lying on the table before her, and her eyes vaguely fell on it. Then she opened the parcel containing the black mantilla he had given her, and tried it on, and the rich lace fell in graceful folds over her shapely shoulders.

‘It hides my shabby dress,’ she thought, not ill-pleased. It suited her artistic taste, and she determined to wear it the next day.

And she did wear it. To George Gifford’s great delight, when he arrived at Mrs Fryer’s on the following morning, he found Laura already dressed in a white gown, and his handsome gift. She wore also a large, wide-brimmed black hat, and her whole effect was graceful and picturesque.

‘How well you look,’ he said, with his grey eyes fixed on her admiringly.

‘Fine feathers,’ answered Laura, smiling, lifting an end of her lace scarf.

‘It certainly becomes you, and thank you very much for wearing it.’

‘I could not resist it. My female vanity was too strong for me.’

‘I am very pleased, and now are you ready?’

Then they started, and presently found themselves on the sunlit river, gliding onwards between its willowy banks. It was a glorious day. The sky, deep blue, flecked here and there with feathery clouds, and the breeze fresh and strong. It brought a bloom to Laura’s pale cheeks, and a brightness to her eyes, and for the time at least her life did not seem dreary and weary.

‘How beautiful the sunshine is,’ she said, pulling off her glove and dipping one of her little hands into the sparkling water.

‘It makes a great difference,’ answered George Gifford, who was using his oars steadily.

Laura turned round and laughed. His

common-place reply amused her somehow, and tickled her sense of humour. George Gifford was not, in fact, a man of poetic dreams or fancies. He was sensible, straightforward, and honest-hearted, and Laura knew him to be all this. But his mind was no more akin to hers than the flower to the sturdy oak. But of this he was quite unconscious. And this denseness made him pluck up his courage, and as they were walking together after leaving the boat on their way to the hotel, he once more asked her to be his wife.

‘Perhaps I should not speak now, when you are my guest,’ he said, ‘but will you give me a little hope, Laura?’

‘It is so sudden. I—I never thought of this,’ faltered Laura.

‘I thought of it, as you know, a long while ago, and I have thought of it ever since,’ answered Gifford. ‘And I can’t bear to think of you struggling on alone in the world. I will try all I can to make you happy, Laura.’

‘I am sure you would do that; you are so good,’ answered Laura, with downcast eyes.

‘I don’t know about goodness, but I know I would do my best for you, and a man can do no more.’

‘No, indeed.’

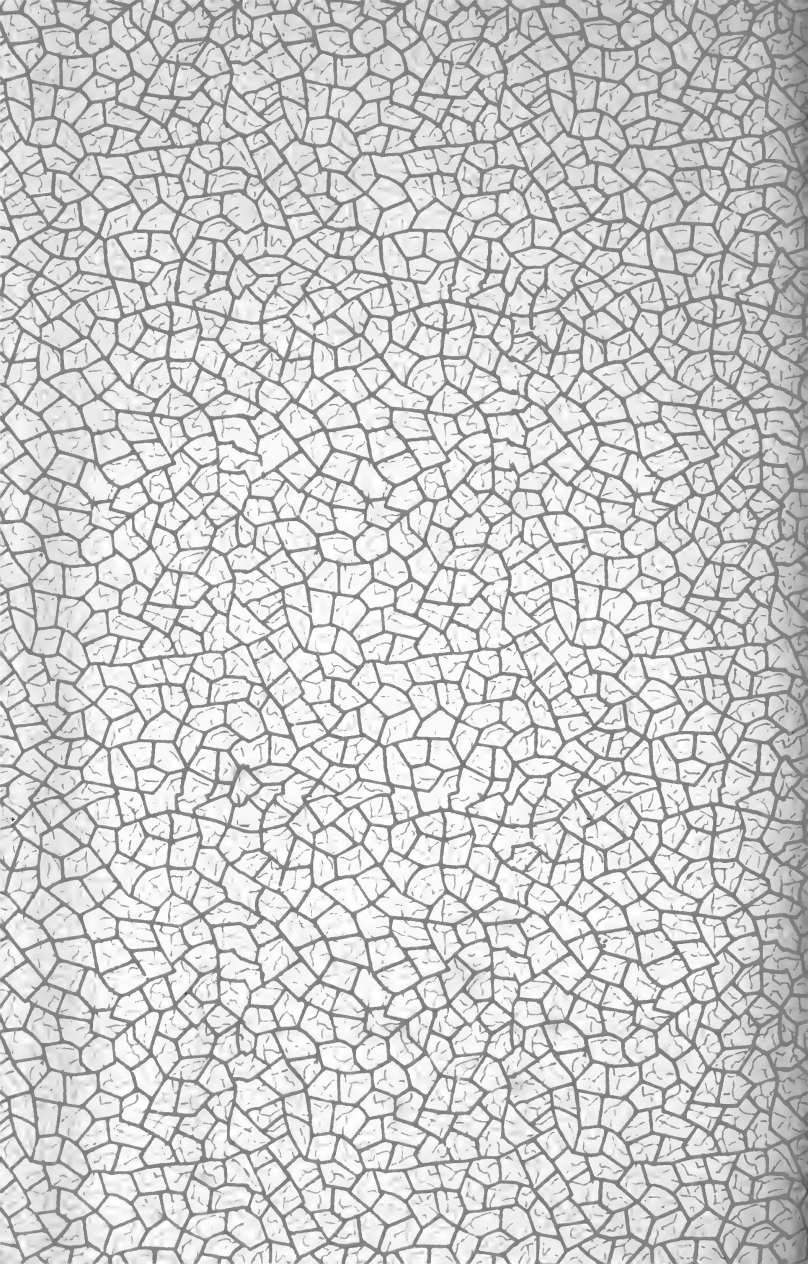
‘Don’t answer now unless you like,’ continued Gifford, ‘but think it over, and it will make me very happy if your answer is favourable.’

‘Very well,’ half whispered Laura, and not another word was said on the subject during the rest of the day, until

just as they were parting at Mrs Fryer's door on their return.

‘Let me know to-morrow,’ said Gifford in a low tone, as he warmly pressed Laura's hand in his, and the next moment he was gone.

END OF VOL. I.



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